Woman and Goddess in Hinduism

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For the pioneering women scholars on whose shoulders we stand:
Julia Leslie, Barbara Holdrege, Rita Gross, Sanjukta Gupta,
and many others

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Introduction:
A Hermeneutics of Intersubjectivity

Rita D. Sherma

In recent years, the growing interest in the relationship between religion and "the Feminine," whether human or divine, has given rise to diverse academic volumes exploring this connection in different traditions. The academic examination of the Feminine in Hindu traditions has been, for the most part, rooted in efforts to describe and interpret, using various scholarly methods, including ethnographic, historical, or literary research on Hindu women and Hindu goddess traditions. Important as these areas of study are, they are necessarily circumscribed by the methods of inquiry they employ and hence are, generally speaking, not concerned with exploring the relevance of Hindu understandings of the Feminine to theological concerns or contemporary forms of gender activism.

The aim of this book is to offer a multilayered exploration of Hindu understandings of the Feminine, both human and divine, that emphasize thealogical and activist methods and aims over historical, anthropological, and literary ones. In this regard, this is essentially a collective work of constructive Hindu thealogy. We mean to employ the term "thealogy" here in the broadest possible sense.

The traditional academic parameters of textuality and anthropology are, of course, necessitated by the demands of credible scholarship. They can, however, be complemented by thealogical reflection and constructive engagement. Such an approach could provide a more nuanced exploration of the significance of Hindu understandings of the feminine in terms of the following:

- conceptual resources for thealogical reflection and reinterpretation;

- alternative insights on the multiple possible modes of envisioning female empowerment and the divine feminine in feminist theory discourse; and
- the relevance of Hindu models of the feminine to cross-cultural philosophical, theological, ontological, or sociological interchange.

In offering multiple constructive explorations of the Hindu Feminine—some with, and others without the framework of a confessional stance—this book uses a wide-angle lens to understand more fully certain aspects of the Feminine in the Hindu ethos in terms of their potential for application as elements of constructive thealogy.

The chapters of this volume approach the Feminine in Hindu traditions from the standpoint of intersubjective construction via a method that I have termed *dialexis*. Dialexis here refers to a form of intellectual engagement "across styles" that takes as its starting point an adequate accounting of contextualized signification. The various styles of expression and communication that cultures use to express themselves are grounded in lexical choices made in particular historical, geographical, and societal contexts.

"Lexis" refers to the use of expressions relevant to the style of a text or of any communicative encounter. The term "lexical choice" is being used here to signify more than words alone; we use it to refer to all attempts to convey meaning including words, art, ritual, music, and so forth. Ideas that may be, in themselves, universally applicable, may be difficult to comprehend if they are deeply informed by, and entrenched in, an unfamiliar cultural ethos. Dialexis should allow us to penetrate those contextual lexical or communicative choices. We consider dialexis, which will be described in greater detail later, to be the foundation of intersubjective scholarship.

The "hermeneutics of intersubjectivity" is an approach that assumes that the "Other" is not just an object of study, but also a subject from whom I can learn. Thus, this volume starts with the assumption that understanding and respect are both aided by, and dependent on, scholars' perceptions of the Other not merely as object of investigation, but also as subject; and not only as subject but as "subject with whom we are in conversation."

The demands of rigorous, credible scholarship and the desire to foster mutual understanding are both served when descriptive parameters are viewed not as limits but as starting points, and when

scholarship is complemented by an engaged hermeneutics that strives to be dialogical. We view such an approach as of particular significance for the contemporary academic study of Hinduism, which has suffered from deeply corrosive tensions due, in part, to applications of academic frameworks deeply grounded in the Western ethos—such as Freudian and Marxist hermeneutics—to Hindu materials in ways that some individuals have perceived to be inherently distorting and disjunctive.

Methodology: Toward a Hermeneutics of Intersubjectivity

Methods of study (whether textual, anthropological, iconographic, or other) are epistemological tools; they are modes of uncovering information. They are not, however, hermeneutical orientations, and the two should not be confused. For example, textual exegesis is a *method* that can be interpreted and understood through many different hermeneutical lenses (such as, e.g., feminist hermeneutics). It is the *lens* that is the hermeneutical orientation; textual exegesis is a modality of investigation. The exegesis may be deeply influenced by the hermeneutics used, but they are not the same thing.

The presentation, therefore, of a certain hermeneutical angle by this volume—which I refer to as the hermeneutics of intersubjectivity—is not an attempt to assess the value of different methods for the study of the feminine (or any other issue) in the Hindu ethos. This is because—as per philosophical hermeneutics—we can define *hermeneutics as the effort of the human mind to fully understand, process, internalize, and be transformed by that which it encounters*, whereas a methodology is a body of procedures, protocols, rules, and modes of investigation grounded in a given field of inquiry. The first, ultimately, is a way of being; the second is a way of acting. They cannot be conflated.

The "Hermeneutics of Alterity"

A lens that could be termed the "hermeneutics of alterity" has often been used to study the feminine (both real and conceptual) in Hindu thought and culture. "Alterity" signifies "Otherness," from the German "alter," or "other," not as an account of basic individual variations but as the systematic categorization of classes of peoples and cultures as irretrievably "Other." The hermeneutics of alterity comes

into play whenever we are examining something that is seen as clearly outside of ourselves.

It is important to acknowledge that a hermeneutics of alterity can allow for the distance necessary to initiate timely critique, or elicit new threads of meaning out of a tradition. However, it must be applied with care. Uncritically applied, it runs the risk that the uniqueness of the identity of a conceptual and actual lifeworld (*lebenswelt*) will be misread *not* to the point of deconstruction, but to the point of misconception. In such a case, the lifeworld of the Other, *as understood by the Other*, ceases to have any bearing on the scholar's interpretation. In other words, commenting and interpreting without accessing the conceptual *key* of the Other does not help to unlock the cultural baggage.

In terms of contemporary reconstruction in theology or philosophy of religion, the hermeneutics of alterity can be problematic even when individuals embedded in an ethos use it to create a separation between themselves and the culture to which they belong in order to facilitate critical examination and revision. This danger exists, in part, because of the current global religious situation in which orthodox religion is in violent conflict, in many parts of the world, not only with the religious traditions of others, but also with the implications of modernity and postmodernity. There is also the possibility that the disjunction evoked through a misreading of a text or the misunderstanding of a context may be less effective in birthing change than a reflective reconstruction that integrates (or at least, *acknowledges*) important aspects of the tradition's viewpoint, though not its entire vision of the world and human life.

Contemporary feminist activist scholarship constantly engages this ground reality—that *effective*, nonviolent change requires acknowledgment and understanding of the tradition's perspective before theological reconstruction can be created and pragmatically applied. This hermeneutical orientation is in evidence, for example, in Rita Gross's *Soaring and Settling: Buddhist Perspectives on Contemporary Social and Religious Issues* or Rosemary Ruether's *Gaia and God: An Ecofeminist Theology of Earth Healing*.

The effort to *include and surpass* the hermeneutics of alterity is central to the thrust of this volume. This collection of essays seeks to widen the examination of the theme of the Hindu tradition's relationship to the idea of the "Feminine" by opening their analyses to "intersubjective construction" and "dialexis." Both are key components of a "hermeneutics of intersubjectivity."

The Hermeneutics of Intersubjectivity

An approach that embodies intersubjective construction entails reflecting on an encounter with particular subjects and materials in a way that not only seeks comprehensive understanding of their lexical context, but also strives to articulate how those subjects or materials may be engaged to inform—or transform—one's own constructive thought. It is important to keep in mind, however, that when we address the Other as subject with whom we are in conversation, we are not engaged in a monologue; rather, we are immersed in a *dialogue*. As we are transformed by our encounter with the Other toward broadening our vision, so should the Other—in an ideal circumstance—be moved to reconsider present perspectives.

Only when the possibility of mutual transformation remains available can the *fusion of horizons*—Hans-Georg Gadamer's dream—remain viable. The hermeneutics of intersubjectivity does not imply uncritical acceptance of the Other or his/her lifeworld. It does, however, give primacy to integrating our deepest understanding of the self-perception of the Other into our conceptual portrait of the Other. Intersubjective hermeneutics allows room for both *critical and constructive* engagement, but it does so with the premise that I cannot change what I do not fully understand.

The intellectual origins of the intersubjective orientation are commonly thought to lie in the field of self psychology. Founded by Heinz Kohut, MD (1913–1981), self psychology was the first major psychoanalytic movement in the United States to identify the crucial role of empathy in understanding human development and psychoanalytic transformation in patients. But the intersubjective orientation must not be equated with empathy as defined in self psychology. It is also rooted in existential phenomenology, structuralism, and philosophical hermeneutics.

Intersubjective scholarship in religious studies involves more than writing phenomenologically about one's encounter with a religious tradition. Because we are human and our cognition reacts to all that it encounters, there will be a reaction—intellectual, emotive, traumatic, creative, and so forth-—to the Other and his/her lifeworld. Thus any investigation that takes us out of our familiar cognitive space entails contemplation, on the internal effect, engendered by the new encounter, toward one's own constructive thought. For critical, constructive, and reflective philosophical and theological scholarship to be engaging and transformative, the articulation of the phenomenon that we

have observed needs to be accompanied by contemplation on, and awareness of, our own internal response.

Dialexis

Lexis refers to the study of, or *use* of, words—especially those particular choices that are relevant to the *style* of a text or of any communicative encounter. *Lexical choice* implies communicative choice, and is an important aspect of creating a *style* suitable for a particular audience. We use lexical choice here to mean more than just words; we use it to imply all efforts to convey meaning whether verbal, artistic, musical, and so forth. This has a twofold significance for the scholar studying a tradition.

First, it signifies that the way in which a culture articulates itself is rooted in lexical choices made as a result of its historic, geographic, and cultural context. For example, if we use the concept of "transcending fear" as our metaphor, we can see that the iconography of Kālī in *abhāya mudrā* (the hand gesture that conveys "fear not") is expressive of a lexical choice made by a certain people embedded in, and responding within, a certain culture. This is not, however, the only possible lexical choice for conveying the concept of "transcending fear." This choice has famously horrified European missionaries whose hermeneutical toolbox did not have the right instruments of understanding to "unpack" the meaning of Kālī's iconography. Thus, conceptual insights that are, in themselves, transcontextual, may appear totally conditioned by, and embedded in, a limited expression. To be sure, there are marked variegations in lexical choices within cultures themselves, which demands a nonessentialist approach.

I am introducing the term "dialexis," therefore, to refer to an intellectual engagement "across expressive styles" taking into account the factor of diversity. That is to say, different cultures (and groups within cultures) have divergent emotional, aesthetic, and intellectual "styles." This may suggest various parameters for hermeneutical examinations of, and reactions to, iconographies, texts, narratives, and so forth. We maintain that dialexis provides the impetus for looking beyond surface appearances to help us better understand the communications or insights under the different contextual lexical choices presented to us.

Adequate Hermeneutical Effort

The second issue at stake, given the variable of lexical choice, is that of adequate hermeneutical effort. When we encounter something

new, we need to be vigilant about the uncritical use of hermeneutic lenses that are themselves outgrowths of culture and context. In such an enterprise, how are we to know that our interpretation of the "feminine in Hinduism" (or of anything at all) accords with *what is meant by the tradition itself or the majority of its practitioners*? How do we determine whether the elicitation of meaning that our internal responses are based on is grounded in adequate understanding?

For the renowned philosopher of hermeneutics Hans-Georg Gadamer (2000), the acknowledgment of the Other as a self-aware subject, with existence and experience that may challenge and alter our perspectives, should be at the root of our understanding. Keeping this position in mind, let us regard this quotation from his essay "Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity; Subject and Person" in which he distinguishes between Heidegger's and his own approach to intersubjectivity:

> I was trying, in opposition to Heidegger, to show how the understanding of the Other possesses a fundamental significance. The way Heidegger had developed the preparation of the question of Being, and the way he had worked out the understanding of the most authentic existential structure of Dasein, the Other could only show itself in its own existence as a limiting factor. In the end, I thought the very strengthening of the Other against me would, for the first time, allow me to open up the real possibility of understanding. To allow the Other to be valid against oneself—and all my hermeneutic works gradually develops from there—is not only to recognize in principle the limitation of one's own framework, but is also to allow one to go beyond one's own possibilities, precisely in a dialogical, communicative, hermeneutic process. (284)

Thus, according to Gadamer's vision, intersubjective dialogue provides a means for the extension of one's own possibilities for growth and understanding. To "allow the Other to be valid against oneself" means to relativize one's own position/belief/worldview and understand that it is only one among a variety of possible positions; it also helps one to recognize that every stance one takes has been informed by one's own background and presuppositions. This premise seems self-evident after decades of postmodern discourse. Nevertheless, the *fusion of horizons* that Gadamer famously advocated for has yet to fully manifest, because its point of departure is not merely that "all things are relative." It begins with the premise that we have something to learn from the Other; that we grow conceptually when we take the Other's self-understanding seriously and find the lacuna in our own

vision filled by new insights gleaned. This conceptual growth does not include the uncritical legitimation of every view held, and every practice engaged in, by the Other. The keyword here is *understanding*, not *legitimation*. Clearly, the Other may be beholden to highly problematic worldviews and lifestyles. Yet, even in such a case, intersubjective approaches will, as Gadamer notes in the citation given earlier, "open up the real possibility of understanding" because no actual comprehension of the impact of the ideas and practices of the Other—whether positive or negative—is possible without understanding how these things are actually experienced by the Other. Intersubjectivity allows for further travel along the hermeneutical path because only in conversation can I discover whether I truly understand what I believe I understand. As philosopher Simon Glynn (1998: 9) notes:

> There is, of course, an ambiguity in [the] notion of the Other, in that it is not (only) the world of objects, but, or so Hegel, for example, would claim, other subjects, that reflect me to myself, thereby rendering me self-conscious . . . [Thus], entering into communicative relation with the other we come to re-cognize this relation as the primordial ground from which the notions of self and other, together with the problematic of communication, derive.

Glynn, like Gadamer, is pointing us to the insight that in the intersubjective exchange, understanding—not only of the Other, but of the self—is enhanced. Only when the "Other" is regarded as subject and not object is such intersubjective encounter possible. But a critical reflection on our internal response is also necessary. This is where dialexis becomes relevant. Hans Georg Gadamer, especially, through his extensive arguments for the indispensability of "*Vorurteil*" (prejudgment, culturally and historically conditioned presuppositions), has convinced many of the necessity of arguing in a "virtuous circle" when dealing with understanding anything in depth. "Circle," in such a context, is no longer mere metaphor but a true description of the process of understanding that moves from a given premise to embrace a new situation in order to return to the origin of the question. The acute awareness of our own preconceptions can provide the space for self-examination and lead to greater clarity and comprehension, not only in a given field of study, but in terms of our own lifeworld. Indeed, perhaps *hermeneutical spiral* is a better description of this process.

In the process, not only is understanding achieved, but the questioner is rewarded with a deeper understanding of the possibilities

that exist for *her/his own worldview*. The hermeneutical circle is often visible in the works of comparative scholars who, in their quest to understand the Other, uncover deep insights and hidden intuitions within their own traditions. Francis X. Clooney's comparative work, for example, often exhibits the marks of the hermeneutical circle. For this to occur, however, one has to engage *across styles*, by way of which one can see over and through the *lexical choice* of the "Other" (not by suspending prejudgment or Vorurteil, for this is impossible, but by being conscious of it and of the form it may impart to one's understanding).

Consequently, as Ricoeur (1981: 44) observes, "*understanding* ceases to appear as a simple *mode of knowing* in order to become *a way of being*" (emphasis added). The hermeneutics of intersubjectivity offers an orientation whereby such a transformation becomes possible when faced with a lifeworld different from our own.

Beyond the Emic/Etic Chasm

This volume attempts to provide a forum for constructive intersubjective scholarship on Hinduism and the Feminine. As scholars, whether we study the elements of our own tradition or those of another, we are, due to the very nature of our work, "outsiders." Therefore, in this context, the cultural or religious background of the scholar is not at issue. What is significant is the hermeneutical methodology. This group of essays applies (i) an *intersubjective* constructive or critical lens to encounters with the feminine in Hinduism within (ii) the framework of *dialexis*. In offering constructive, reflective examinations *without* the requirement of a confessional stance, this project challenges current conceptions of the emic/etic chasm and its expected impact on scholarship.

Themes

Part I: Theological Reflection

The essays of this volume apply a hermeneutics of intersubjectivity to elicit a nuanced and multilayered examination of the philosophical and pragmatic value of Hindu understandings of the feminine, human and divine, in terms of three major orientations. First, there is an exploration of conceptual resources, within greater Hindu traditions of the feminine divine, for thealogical reflection and reconstruction (Sharma, Clooney, and Saxena, in this volume).

"Satī, Suttee, and Sāvitrī," written by Arvind Sharma, observes that the ideals traditional Hindu women are supposed to follow are enshrined in Hindu traditions in the expression "Satī-Sāvitrī." This expression refers to two ideal women within the Hindu tradition, the details of whose mythic or legendary life are much celebrated in Hindu lore and known to most Hindus, at least in broad outline. It is also conventionally believed that the ideal for the traditional Hindu widow is similarly represented by the figure of the woman who burns herself with her husband at the funeral pyre, or in other words, by the wife who performs Suttee. Sharma argues that although Sāvitrī is placed alongside Satī by tradition as the carrier of traditional norms (in the expression Satī-Sāvitrī), she really turns out to be a counter-model to the Satī/Suttee. The biographical details of her life call into question at least three aspects of the "traditional" patriarchal Hindu values, namely, that the birth of a boy is to be preferred to that of a girl; that the virtuous daughter accepts the husband chosen for her by her parents, instead of choosing him herself; and that if he predeceases her, then she should ideally accompany him in the afterlife by committing Suttee. Sharma argues that the real significance of the projection of Sāvitrī as an ideal type, as embodying the power of a woman's *tapas* (the "heat," or power of ascetic practices) to transvalue traditional patriarchal mores, has been overlooked.

Francis Xavier Clooney's essay "Female Beauty, Female Power: Seeing Devī in the *Saundarya Laharī*" suggests that the one hundred verses of the medieval hymn of praise for the Great Goddess known as the *Saundarya Laharī* is a promising resource for a rethinking of gender that can be relevant to both Hindu and wider contexts. The *Saundarya Laharī* praises the Goddess (Devī) as consort of Śiva and as world foundation and world ruler, as the energy pervading the Tantric *cakra*s and rising as *kuṇḍaliṇī* through them, as represented indirectly in yantric designs and secret mantras, and as the beautiful focus of liberative visualization. Commentators on the hymn have highlighted, by literary analysis, the interaction between theoretical and practical theologies of bliss and the soteriological aesthetics of beauty. In this literary tradition, conventional expectations are honored but revisioned in a way that does complexify and privilege appearance, physicality, and relatedness in a thealogy that has much to offer contemporary reflections on femininity, physicality, and divinity.

Neela Bhattacharya Saxena undertakes a personal hermeneutical journey in "Mystery, Wonder, and Knowledge in the Triadic Figure of Mahāvidyā" to uncover the nuances of meaning hidden in the worship of the esoteric deity Chinnamastā, one of a major iconographic group

of ten forms (the Mahāvidyās) of the Great Goddess. Chinnamastā is quite well known among the tantric practitioners, but she is hardly known among lay worshippers of the Goddess. There are very few temples dedicated to her, and her image is not meant to be worshipped by ordinary people. This essay is a personal, constructive exploration into the meaning of Chinnamastā. Saxena observes that the mystery, wonder, and knowledge intrinsic to that icon illustrates how the mind is capable of visualizing ultimate abstractions in the most concrete of images. She argues that in this liberating figure congregate many philosophical ideas: the nondual nature of reality reflective of Upaniṣadic thinking and dualities such as death and life or spirit and matter merge in that icon in such a way that the nondualist vision becomes immanently real, making the world of lived reality radiantly numinous.

Part II: Reclaiming Alternative Modalities of Feminine Power

Hindu perceptions of the divine feminine inform and shape Hindu expressions of female agency and authority that are beginning to be articulated in a different key from Western feminist ideals. Taking this as a point of departure, the second thematic discourse is toward an examination of alternative modes of construction of the feminine, available within the Hindu traditions, that offer empowerment to women and potential for cross-cultural dialogue on interpretations of the feminine in feminist philosophical and sociological discourse (Herman, Pechilis, and Biernacki, in this volume).

In "Sītā *Rasoī*s and Śākta *Pīṭha*s: A Feminine Reclamation of Mythic and Epic Proportions," Phyllis K. Herman challenges stereotypes of Sītā, one of the most important Hindu conceptualizations of the divine feminine, as weak and victimized. Herman notes the existence throughout India of Śākta *Pīṭha*s, places affirmed as mythic sites of power and sacrality that contain parts of the remains of the sacred body of Satī (one of the forms of the Goddess) and are renowned as pilgrimage spots. Less well known, but perhaps equally intriguing, are pilgrimage sites dedicated to the remains of the "kitchen" of Sītā, the much loved and long-suffering heroine of the epic Rāmāyaṇa. These Sītā's kitchens (Sītā *Rasoī*s) are understood to manifest the power of Sītā (an exemplar of the feminine—both human and divine). Interestingly, Sītā *Rasoī*s and Śākta *Pīṭha*s coexist on the ground in at least two significant locales noted in the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and the nexus of the two models of feminine sacred space combine in a manner evocative of the potential of the power vested in providence

and nurturance with which Sītā is so deeply associated. Herman re-envisions this important mythic paragon of the feminine in a way that suggests the veneration of these shrines and the pilgrimages associated with them can empower women by bestowing dignity and valor on that which is and has been such a ubiquitous part of being female. She argues that it is not the name of Sītā's abnegation but her self-agency that the daily kitchen work of women can be reclaimed as, and transformed into sacred ritual. The ways that this reclamation speaks to, and of, the lives of ordinary women who seek a connection to the divine from within their own pragmatic life experience has important implications for a more pluralistic understanding of the relationship of the feminine and the divine.

"Spreading *Śakti*" by Karen Pechilis contributes to the academic discourse on the relationship between women and the feminine divine by focusing on how female gurus (often perceived as embodiments of the Goddess) mediate between their dual identity as guru and woman. At times, this embodiment is made explicit through particular actions of the guru; frequently, it is, in fact, a primary way for devotees to express their understanding of the nature of the guru. The identification of female gurus with the Goddess posits a direct relationship between human women and the feminine divine, both in terms of the guru's identity and the guru's relationship with her followers. This direct relationship offers a locus for the constructive study of the implications and preconceptions of tradition, feminism, thealogy, and sociology in the Hindu traditions. Of particular importance is the guru's simultaneous embodiment of the universal and the particular. The essay reflects on the continuities and contradictions inherent in examining gender within this dynamic, and its implications for cross-cultural explorations in gender construction.

Loriliai Biernacki offers a new understanding of the place of women in Hindu tantra in "The Kālī Practice: Revisiting Women's Roles in Tantra." Looking at tantra with an explicit focus on gender, Biernacki argues that contrary to the current scholarly assessment of the role of women in tantra, one particular form of tantric practice existing especially in Northeast India in the late medieval period (sixteenth–eighteenth centuries) did in fact empower women by recognizing their capacities for spiritual attainment and through a specific practice of generating an ethic toward women. She focuses on texts that have been entirely overlooked, and yet, she contends, they offer a vision of radical dimensions—the possibility of a recovery of the marginalized subject of woman, the other—in a space outside of and antecedent to the modern Western world. The Kālī Practice, on

which her argument is centered, particularly presents a way of viewing women that, she avers, valorizes women and also facilitates shifting deeply ingrained attitudes toward them. The praxis involved in the Kālī Practice explicitly transcends the limited space of rites of worship of women; the attitude of reverence and respect toward women was expected to be maintained at all times. Working with eight published texts, which have so far been left out of the Western scholarly discussion of women's roles in tantra, this essay argues for the presence of an alternative view of women. Biernacki's constructive approach to determining the actual ground realities for women in tantra suggests that an attentive appraisal of this tantric tradition can offer the possibility of a dialectical engagement, the possibility to rethink our own twenty-first-century views, by adapting some of its conceptual formulations to our current context.

Part III: The Feminine Principle in Hindu Thought and Practice: Problems and Possibilities

The third thematic orientation of the essays is toward a critical assessment of the ways that Hindu principles and practices could, or do, help or hinder women and attitudes toward femaleness in contemporary society (Patton, Jarow, Howard, in this volume).

In "Hindu Rituals on Behalf of Women: Notes on First Principles," Laurie L. Patton argues for the application of a "feminist" Mīmāṃsakā perspective. Mīmāṃsakas were traditional interpreters of Vedic ritual hermeneutics. Mīmāṃsā ("investigation") is one of the six *āstika* ("orthodox") schools of Hindu philosophy that has, as its central task, inquiry into the nature of dharma based on careful hermeneutics of the Vedas. The purpose of the essay is neither to legitimize ancient myths in order to valorize the current situation for women in India nor to raid ancient myths for equally problematic feminist purposes. Rather, Patton argues that certain formal perspectives and knowledge from the Mīmāṃsā and other Indian philosophical traditions could also be of great use in employing time-honored ritual modalities for the well-being of women.

Patton suggests a method that focuses on the power of metaphor in certain kinds of Vedic texts, and a fourfold modus operandi: first, following Mark Johnson's work *Moral Imagination* (1993), the assumption is that ancient texts can provide us with both metaphors and narratives, which Johnson argues are the stuff of more informed and complex ethical thinking. Second, we assume that this idea of ethical thought is the Sanskrit equivalent of *pramāṇa*, or right reasoning,

of traditional Vedic interpretive philosophy. Third, an inquiry into *strīdharma*, or the codes of conduct by and about the lives of women, is a legitimate and necessary form of inquiry that should be the appropriate topic of Mīmāṃsā. Fourth and finally, because *pramāṇa* can and does outrank *sadācara* (or traditional concepts of right conduct, morality, or duty) as a form of reasoning about Vedic texts, reinterpretation of Vedic texts can and should provide a critique of current *sadācara*, or contemporary traditional practices, such as female infanticide in present-day India. In other words, basing her arguments on these four principles, Patton suggests that we might use Vedic texts to provide a sophisticated, traditional argument against religious practices concerning abortion or indeed any other practices that harm women. Patton asserts that the reasoning of *pramāṇa* can and should be understood in ethical as well as "logical" ways. Given the preponderance of Hindu rituals being performed today, she notes the possibility of marshaling the flexibility of traditional ritual philosophy, in tandem with a discussion about women's health and human dignity, to create ritual alliances with health care on behalf of women and female children. If *homa* offerings can be performed on behalf of peace, as was done at the Hindu Temple of Atlanta after 9/11, then surely such basic rituals for women's health can also be part of a contemporary ritual repertoire conducive to the public good.

In "The Feminine Concept of Surrender in Vaiṣṇava Discourse," E. H. Rick Jarow examines the complex of meanings that attend to the linkage of the feminine and the soteriological concept of "surrender" in devotional traditions attached to the worship of Viṣṇu. Vaiṣṇava devotional (bhakti) theologies, from the Āḻvārs to Rāmānuja, Madhvācārya, and on, promote the centrality of "surrender" as essential for the realization of divine love. Such surrender has, moreover, been consistently linked with the "feminine," either through mood (*bhāva*) or as a devotional sensibility displayed by such paradigmatic female figures as the *pativratā* (the wife devoted to her lord) or the maidservants of the divine cowherd, Kṛṣṇa. Problems with this position, however, have long been cited by various critical schools that see the propagation of the female devotional sentiment as a linchpin of ruling-class ideologies of hierarchy and subordination. The ethos of self-surrender has been tied in with everything from the dismissal of the corporeal world as *māyā*, to the setting up of unbridgeable dichotomies between the transcendent and mundane spheres, to India's loss of power and sovereignty. This essay looks at both sides of the surrender issue, beginning with an examination of the basic etymologies for surrender in seminal Vaiṣṇava texts, and

then exploring the "semantics of surrender" through key personalities in devotional literatures. The exploration of the phenomenology of self-surrender eventually comes to the particular bhakti understanding of the inner being as female. Looking into various possibilities as to why a man wants to be a woman before God, this essay seeks to mediate between so-called insider and outsider positions on self-surrender.

The final essay, "Gandhi's Reconstruction of the Feminine: Toward an Indigenous Hermeneutics" by Veena R. Howard, analyzes the methodology Mohandas Gandhi used to integrate traditional models and modern goals for the freedom of Hindu women. It examines his use and reinterpretation of Hindu mythical characters and stories in securing women's rights, in seeking to empower them, and in constructing his vision of the Feminine. The essay explores, for example, how Gandhi succeeded in making Sītā, traditionally revered as the model for female sacrifice and subordination, into an example of feminine autonomy and womanly participation in public life. The essay raises several questions about the applicability of Gandhi's methodology to current issues among Indian Hindus: Can Gandhi's methodology serve as a hermeneutic for addressing the complex framework of feminine and gender issues? Can it be applied to address the ever-existing tension between traditionally defined roles for women and public roles traditionally monopolized by men? Can Gandhi's construct of the feminine play a role in empowering women in a globalized world?

Conclusion

The academic study of religion is embedded in a world that is increasingly pluralistic, and we live in an age of escalating global interaction. The mutual understanding and respect demanded by our present situation are both aided by, and dependent on, the perception of the "Other" not only as object, but as subject; and not only as subject, but as *subject with which we are in conversation*. This cannot be achieved solely by the use of what I have referred to here as a hermeneutics of alterity. An exclusive adherence to conventional parameters of investigative engagement cannot lead the way to constructive engagement and creative deliberation grounded in intersubjectivity.

Conversely, the demands of credible scholarship and the need for fostering a constructive approach are *both* served when conventional parameters are viewed not as boundaries but as starting points, and when scholarship is complemented by a conscious, engaged

hermeneutics of intersubjectivity that includes description but also creates room for constructive philosophical reflection.

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PART I

Theological Reflection

CHAPTER 1

Satī, Suttee, and Sāvitrī

Arvind Sharma

Introduction

The ideal of Indian womanhood has often been conveyed through the highly evocative expression "Satī-Sāvitrī." The figures of Satī and Sāvitrī constitute paradigmatic norms of Hindu womanhood and therefore deserve close semiotic analysis. Satī is viewed as an incarnation of the Mahādevī, the Great Goddess, and the princess Sāvitrī is the legendary heroine of the love story of Sāvitrī and Satyavān in the epic Mahābhārata.

One must first recognize that Satī and Sāvitrī are often mentioned in the same breath and therefore must be seen as constituting not just a parity, not just a pair, but something more: a *continuum*—and that too, an *ascending* continuum. The point here is that Satī killed herself for the sake of her divine husband, Śiva (much to his distress), while Sāvitrī did one better—she did not give up her own life but rather saved the life of the husband himself. Perhaps the progressive idealization represented by them becomes clearer if we bring the anglicized term *Suttee* into the picture, as the woman who burns herself on the pyre with her husband. Many scholars have noted the fact that the Satī, from whom "Suttee" gets its name, ***did not*** mount the pyre of her husband but rather killed herself, while he was alive, in protest against his humiliation. So now we have a woman who cannot bear to see her husband insulted, such is her devotion to him, even when he is alive. Then there is the Suttee who cannot bear to be separated from her husband and burns herself on the pyre with him; finally there is Sāvitrī, who accompanies her dead husband, remaining herself alive, and rescues him from the jaws of death.

Thus, from one point of view, one might argue that Satī, who burns herself to death while her husband is still alive, is probably a moral notch above the wife who only burns herself *with* her deceased husband. However, from another point of view, Satī leaves her husband on his own, while the Suttee accompanies him even in death, and Sāvitrī not only accompanies him but brings him back. Hence if sensitivity to a husband's honor is the yardstick, then perhaps Satī could be placed above the Suttee, but if devoted companionship for life is the gold standard of womanly virtue, then one can identify a rising moral arc as one moves from Satī, to Suttee, to Sāvitrī. Thus Satī, Suttee, and Sāvitrī, in this reckoning, represent a seamless intensifying ideal of Hindu womanhood, in which a wife's position is by her husband's side in every circumstance.

However, this cannot simply be construed as the Hindu version of "stand by your man" regardless of his weaknesses, because: (i) in each of the aforementioned circumstances, whether it is Satī, the Suttee, or Sāvitrī, the husband is blameless; and (ii) the wife's role is an assertive one (if not aggressive). The wife is not merely a clinging vine standing by her man, but is acting as defender of his honor (Satī); his companion-protector—through her prayers and piety—in the afterlife (the Suttee); or his heroic rescuer (Sāvitrī).

Sāvitrī as a Countermodel to Satī

I would now like to revisit this scene to argue that, in some ways, Sāvitrī presents a *countermodel* to Satī, and maybe the fact that she is mentioned after Satī in the popular expression Satī-Sāvitrī indicates that she represents a higher model, which is discontinuous rather than continuous with that of Satī. The point, simply put, would be that Sāvitrī stands apart in her devotion to her husband, because she does *not* kill herself (like Satī and the Suttee) but brings him back to life.

My argument possesses both a general and a specific dimension. Let me begin with the general. The normal value pattern in a patriarchal Hindu household is one in which while the birth of a daughter is not unwelcome, that of a son is preferred. It is also a pattern in which the husband for the daughter is selected by the parents, who give her away in marriage. And it is also a pattern in which while a woman is *not* expected to burn herself with the husband who predeceases her, she is glorified if she does so. It has *not* been sufficiently realized that although hailed as the supreme exemplar of Hindu womanhood,

Sāvitrī, in her life, did not conform to *any of these* roles. I translate here the relevant text from the Mahābhārata that deals with her birth. It runs as follows:

> Yudhiṣṭhira said: O Great Sage! I grieve not for myself, nor for my brothers, nor for the loss of kingdom, as much as I do for Draupadī. We were saved by her when harassed by evil people during the gambling match. Then she was forcibly abducted by Jayadratha from the forest. Has any woman been seen or heard of formerly as devoted to her husband and as great as Draupadī?
>
> Mārkaṇḍeya said: King Yudhiṣṭhira! Listen to the glory of women of distinguished background and how such distinction was attained by Princess Sāvitrī. There ruled in the country of Madra a pious king, devoted entirely to virtue, who respected Brahmins and those who sought his refuge; who was true to his word, and who had subdued his senses. [This king] was a sacrificer, a liberal donor, competent, loved by his urban and rural subjects, ever engaged in securing the good of all. His name was Aśvapati. With advancing age, he began to feel depressed and undertook severe austerities for the sake of obtaining progeny. He ate little at appointed times, remained chaste, and subdued his senses. That best of kings offered oblations a hundred thousand times with the Sāvitrī mantra, and ate sparingly only every sixth watch. He spent eighteen years observing this vow. Goddess Sāvitrī, pleased with him at the completion of the eighteenth year, revealed herself to the king, stepping out of the fire-altar with much delight. The boon-giving goddess then spoke to the king as follows: "O King, I am pleased with your chastity, purity, restraint, self-control, and complete devotion to me. O Aśvapati, king of Madra, ask for any boon you want. You should never falter in doing the right thing." Aśvapati said: "I virtuously adopted this course for the sake of obtaining progeny. O goddess, may I have many sons who will extend my lineage. If you are pleased with me, O goddess, then this is what I choose as my wish. The Brahmins tell me that to continue one's line is one's supreme duty." Sāvitrī said: "I have already spoken to Brahmā on your behalf for a son, knowing well your desire. By the grace of the self-created Creator, O gentle one, a brilliant daughter will soon be born to you. You should not say anything on this account under any circumstances, for pleased with you I say so in place of Brahmā."
>
> Mārkaṇḍeya said: "So be it": the king acknowledged the words of Sāvitrī, and implored again "Let it be so soon." Then Sāvitrī disappeared and the king returned to his palace. The king, well-pleased, continued to live in the kingdom, ruling over his subjects virtuously.[1]

The king and queen pray for a son, and a *daughter* is born to them instead. And the king is asked by the goddess not "to say anything on this account under any circumstances," regarding this change of sex! And the king goes away well pleased. This is the first case of value inversion, which I argue, characterizes much of Sāvitrī's life.

We continue with Sāvitrī's story, and I would now like to argue that her name itself seems to represent a case of value inversion. The narrative in the Mahābhārata proceeds as follows:

> After some time had passed, the devout eldest queen became pregnant. O best of Bharatas, the seed grew in the queen, the princess from Mālava, the way the moon waxes in the bright fortnight. Come time she gave birth to a daughter whose eyes were like lotuses, and the delighted king performed the rites for her. She was the affectionate gift of goddess Sāvitrī; she was obtained by offering oblations to Sāvitrī, so the king and the Brahmins named her Sāvitrī.

That she is named Sāvitrī seems innocent enough, but let us consider the fact that there are numerous hymns in the Vedas, "the most sacred being the verse (known as *Gāyatrī* as well as *Sāvitrī*) addressed to the Sun (Savitā) as the supreme generative force. It consists of a short prayer or *mantra* ([RgVeda], III.62.10), translated by Wilson as: 'We meditate on that excellent light of the divine Sun, may he illuminate our mind,' repeated by every 'twice-born' man at his morning and evening devotions. Its repetition is forbidden to menials and *to women*" (Stutley and Stutley, 1977: 97; emphasis added).

It is true that women in India are given names such as Śruti or Sāvitrī, notwithstanding the irony that they don't have access to what their names denote. I would like to highlight the possibility here that in the case of Sāvitrī, it may be a *deliberate* irony, given the antecedent and subsequent facts about her personal life.

The narrative then moves on as she grows from a child into a young woman, or as the epic puts it:

> The princess grew up like goddess Lakṣmī in human form, and in due time the girl became an adolescent. When people saw her, who was like a golden statue as it were, with a slim waist and broad hips—they thought that they were seeing a divine maiden. She had eyes like lotus leaves and she shone forth with brilliance, but no one would marry her; they were intimidated by her brilliance.

They are so intimidated by her brilliance that the father asks her to *choose her own husband*, another point of value inversion in terms of

the tradition. The epic describes the situations as follows:

> Then she fasted, washed the head ritually, worshipped the gods, made offering in the fire, and made the Brahmins recite duly on an auspicious lunar day. Then she collected the remaining flowers and approached her high-souled father, like Lakṣmī incarnate. After bowing at her father's feet and offering the remaining flowers, she stood beside her father with folded hands. The king felt sore distressed at seeing his divinely beautiful daughter in the prime of youth, yet without a suitor.
>
> The King said: My daughter! It is time to give you away in marriage, but no one listens to me. Choose a husband worthy of yourself on your own.[2] Present the man you wish to marry to me, and, after making inquiries, I shall give you away. Choose what you want. As I have heard in the books of law recited by Brahmins, so you too, blessed one, hear from me as I spell it out: a father who does not give his daughter away in marriage, a husband who does not approach his wife, and a son who abandons the mother after her husband has died—all are reprehensible. Lose no time in searching for a husband after having heard me speak thus. Act in such a way that I may not be reproached by the gods.
>
> Mārkaṇḍeya said: Having spoken thus to the daughter, he deputed his old ministers to accompany her in her travels and urged her: "Proceed." She, confident but bashful, saluted her father's feet and, acknowledging her father's orders, set out without hesitation. She traveled to the attractive hermitages of the royal sages, seated on a golden chariot, surrounded by aged ministers. There she saluted the feet of all the worthies distinguished by age and went through all the forests systematically. She traveled through many a region, distributing largesse in all the holy places among the prominent Brahmins.
>
> O descendant of Bharata! Now the king of Madra was sitting in the assembly hall, conversing with the divine sage Nārada who was visiting him, when Sāvitrī returned to her father's palace, along with the ministers, after having visited all the places of pilgrimage and the hermitages. Upon seeing her father seated along with Nārada, she bowed with her head at the feet of both of them.
>
> Nārada said: Where has your daughter been, O king, and where is she coming from? Why have you not given away the young girl to a husband in marriage?
>
> Aśvapati said: It was for this very purpose that I had sent her and she has returned. O divine sage! Hear now what she has to say about the husband she has chosen for herself.
>
> Mārkaṇḍeya said: She, being urged by her father to "describe in detail" and acknowledging the words of the divine sage, spoke as follows: "There is a devout *kṣatriya* Śālva king, known as Dyumatsena, who later on turned blind. After he had lost his eyes and while his son

was still a child, he was deprived of his kingdom by a former enemy who was a neighbor, when he found the opportunity. He left for the forest along with his wife, accompanied by the dear child. Residing in the great forest, he performed severe austerities, observing great vows. His former son has grown up in the hermitage. [His son] Satyavān is the right match for me. I have chosen him as my husband in my heart."

So traditionally boys are preferred to girls, but the king's prodigious piety is rewarded by a girl. Then she is given a name of a mantra that traditionally only boys recite and further, contrary to tradition, she *selects* a husband for herself. When sage Nārada points out that the young man she has chosen for a husband will die in a year, she does not budge and *overrules* her father:

The King said: O Sāvitrī, fair lady, go and choose someone else. This one shortcoming of his makes short work of all his virtues. As the venerable Nārada has said, who is honored even by the gods: his short life will end in a year when he will cast off his body.

Sāvitrī said: Only once is property divided, only once is a daughter given away in marriage, only once does one say "I give," these three acts are performed only once. I have chosen my husband once for all—be he long-lived or short-lived, with or without virtue. I shall not choose another. I have made up my mind, then expressed my resolution with words, and I shall follow it up with action. My resolute mind is my authority.

Sāvitrī, hailed as the ideal type of woman in the tradition, keeps going against tradition, like a kite rising against the wind.

Finally, as predicted, her husband Satyavān dies.

Then, thinking of the words of Nārada, the poor woman calculated the day, the hour, the time, and the moment. In a mere moment she saw a person wearing yellow, with a turban, stout of body and effulgent like the sun. He had dark, white and red eyes, he held a noose in his hand, and looked terrifying. He stood by the side of Satyavān looking at him. On seeing him, she rose with a start, slowly put down the head of the husband, and, with folded hands, spoke thus, with a trembling heart, feeling utterly crushed. "I know you are a god because your body is superhuman. Tell me if you will, O divine being, who are you and what do you want?"

Yama said: O Sāvitrī, you are devoted to your husband and practice asceticism. Therefore I am going to talk to you, O good woman. I am Yama. This husband of yours, Satyavān, the prince, his life has come

to an end. I will tie him up and carry him along. This is what I plan to do.

Mārkaṇḍeya said: O venerable one! The Lord of Death spoke to her in this way and then proceeded to describe in detail what he was going to do to her dear husband. "He is devout, handsome, and possesses many virtues. He deserves better than to be taken by my servants; therefore I have come myself." Then Yama forcefully extracted a being of the size of a thumb with his noose from the body of Satyavān. The body then became lifeless, without breath, comatose, motionless, and repulsive to look at. Yama, tying him up, began to walk in the southern direction. The great and devout Sāvitrī, of perfect vows, followed Yama, beside herself with grief.

Yama said: Sāvitrī, go back and perform the obsequies. You have done your duty by your husband. You have gone as far as you can.

Satyavān, her husband, is dead. But although she belongs to the warrior caste,[3] she does *not even think of committing* suttee. Once again the ideal woman of the tradition goes against the tradition.

What is the Hindu tradition of the ideal woman then glorifying, if in point after point she goes against tradition? The tradition is obviously not glorifying her for conformity. Then what is it glorifying her for? Julius Lipner (1994: 262–263) gives us a hint:

> Sāvitrī has always been held as a model of wifely devotion and resolution. But it was her practice of austerities and accumulation of *tapas* [Skt. Literally "heat," signifying great spiritual energy/power acquired by intense austerities] which enabled her to convert these virtues into success. The text clearly implies that *tapas* is a lever of power. Aśvapati obtained Sāvitrī through rigorous austerity, and Sāvitrī won her boons in the same way. Thus as Yama unbends towards Sāvitrī at the beginning of their meeting, he calls her "a devoted wife" (*patirvratā)* "having (the power of) *tapas*" (*taponvitā*; 3.281.12). When the sages are trying to comfort the parents in the absence of their son and daughter-in-law, one says: "Because his wife Sāvitrī possesses *tapas* and self-control, and is of good conduct, Satyavan lives!" (3.282.10). And at the end, the story-teller concludes by saying: "Thus by mortification (*kṛcchrāt)* Sāvitrī saved all—herself, her father, her mother, her mother-in-law and father-in-law, and her husband's line" (3.283.14). By duly accumulating *tapas* in time, Sāvitrī overcomes what symbolizes the irrevocable passing of time: old age (a hundred sons for her aging father) and death. Something similar happens in the vernacular traditions, many of which arise from (semi-Hinduised) folk culture. In the Bengali *mangals*, for instance, goddesses like Manasā and Caṇḍī are placated by the observance of rigorous *vratas* [vows] by women for the welfare of their loved ones.[4]

Thus, what makes the story of Sāvitrī remarkable is its clear implication that the appropriation by women of difficult and demanding ascetic observances endows daughters, wives, and mothers with the kind of spiritual power associated with great ascetic yogis and seers (*ṛṣi*s). They (the ascetics) are highly revered precisely because they are capable of remarkable self-denial, largely due to their one-pointed dedication to personal spiritual liberation—just as the women, who have adopted many of their ascetic practices, have also proven their capacity for self-denial due to an intense singular focus. The difference is that for the women this focus in not on the spiritual liberation of the self. In contradistinction, it is on the *self-less* desire for the complete well-being of their families and husbands, in this life and the next.

Contra-Suttee: The Ideal of Sāvitrī as a Subversive Alternative to Satī-Suttee

So much for the general argument. I now turn to the more specific argument that Sāvitrī is meant as a countermodel for Satī-Suttee, that her ideal is *subversive* of the practice of suttee.

The common picture of the Suttee is one of unredeemed horror, but within the tradition, the Suttee, somewhat like Christ, takes on the sins of others on herself and redeems them. By one reckoning, she washes away sins of seven generations, past and future, of her own and her husband's family (Sharma, 2005: 92–93). Sāvitrī does something similar *without* performing suttee. As she accompanies Yama, the God of Death, who is carrying her husband away, Yama begins to soften toward her, impressed by her devotion.

> Yama said: Return. I am pleased with your speech,
> Distinguished by clear enunciation and reason.
> Choose a boon other than your husband's life
> O blameless one, I shall grant any wish of yours.
>
> Sāvitrī said: My father-in-law, in the hermitage,
> Has lost his kingdom and now lives there.
> May he regain his vision and be strong,
> May he shine forth like the sun, by your grace.
>
> Yama said: O blameless one, I grant your boon in full;
> It will come to pass as you have asked.
> You seem tired by traveling,
> Return, go lest you get too tired.

Sāvitrī persists in accompanying him and this makes him relent further, after more conversation.

Yama said: The words spoken by you to me
Are cordial, wise, and salutary.
Again choose a boon other than Satyavān's life;
Fair lady, choose a second boon.

Sāvitrī said: The kingdom that my wise father-in-law lost,
May the king obtain his kingdom.
May my father-in-law never stray from his duty.
I choose this as the second boon.

Yama said: He will soon regain his kingdom.
The king shall not stray from his duty.
I have fulfilled your wish, O princess,
Return, lest you get too tired.

Then Yama relents even further, after more conversation.

Yama said: Like water to the thirsty,
Are the words spoken by you.
Again choose a boon other than Satyavān's life.
Good woman, choose the boon you desire.

Sāvitrī said: My father has no sons.
May my father have a hundred sons, my siblings,
Who will extend the family line.
I choose this as the third boon.

Yama said: Good woman, may your father have
A hundred splendid sons to extend the family line.
I have fulfilled your wish, O princess.
Return. You have come a long way.

Sāvitrī's persistence bears further fruit, until she lets her husband escape the noose of death. But before that happens she gets another boon:

Yama said: The words you have spoken, beautiful woman,
I have not heard from anyone else, good woman.
They please me; other than Satyavān's life
Choose a fourth boon and go your way.

Sāvitrī said: May a child born to me and Satyavān
Make the families of both of us flourish.

A hundred strong and powerful sons,
This I choose as my fourth boon.

Yama said: A hundred strong and powerful sons
O frail one, will be born to you and delight you.
O princess, lest you get fatigued,
Return. You have come a long way.

We are now close to the end, with the key lines italicized.

Yama said: As you go on speaking what is pious,
Pleasing, polished, and pithy;
So my devotion to you increases.
O firm in vows, choose any peerless boon.

Sāvitrī said: *You have made no exception with this stipulation,*
As you have in the other cases, O bestower of pride.
I choose life for Satyavān,
For without my husband I am as good as dead.
I do not want happiness without my husband.
I do not want heaven without my husband.
I do not want prosperity without my husband.
I do not plan to live without my husband.
A boon for the birth of hundred sons
Was given by you, but you carry my husband away.
I choose life for Satyavān.
[For] your own words have to come true.

This dramatic last boon tends to overshadow the other boons she obtains. Let us look at them again: (i) father-in-law regains his sight; (ii) father-in-law regains his kingdom; (iii) her own father is granted a hundred sons; (iv) "Make the families of both of us flourish." In other words, Sāvitrī is doing what the Suttee does—bringing blessings to both the families. And she is doing all this while staying alive.

The other interesting point is that like the Suttee, she accompanies the dead husband, but instead of going over with him to the other world, her *tapas* is strong enough to bring him back to this world. To form an idea of the *tapas* she engaged in, one must go back to the *Mahābhārata*. As the day of Satyavān's predicted death approached,

Mārkaṇḍeya said: Then after much time had elapsed, the moment arrived, O king, when Satyavān was meant to die. Sāvitrī, as she kept count of each passing day, always kept in mind the statement made by Nārada. That lady undertook a vow of three nights' duration and kept standing day and night, keeping in mind that he was to die on the

fourth day. The king became distressed when he heard this resolve of the bride. He arose and said to Sāvitrī consolingly: "O princess, the vow you have undertaken is severe in the extreme. It is exceedingly difficult to remain in the same position for three nights."

Sāvitrī said: Dear father, do not feel distressed, I shall carry through my vow. It is undertaken with resolve; resolution is its cause.

Dyumatsena said: I dare not ask you to break your vow. The only proper thing for me to say is that may you make good on your resolution.

Mārkaṇḍeya said: The high-minded Dyumatsena became silent after saying so. And Sāvitrī stood there like a piece of wood. The night of the morning on which the husband was to die, Sāvitrī spent standing, sore distressed, O best of Bharatas. "Today is the day," she thought and lit the fire, and, even though the sun had risen only four cubits, performed the forenoon rites. Then having honored all the Brahmins, elders, mother-in-law, and father-in-law in order of seniority, she stood demurely with folded hands. All the ascetics and all the residents of the hermitage, wishing Sāvitrī well, blessed her that she may never be widowed. Sāvitrī, deep in meditation, accepted the words of the ascetics in her mind, musing that it might be so. The princess, waiting for the hour and the moment, felt extremely sad, thinking of the prediction made by Nārada. O best of Bharatas, then the father-and-mother-in-law spoke to her, when she was all by herself, out of affection as follows.

Father-and-mother-in-law said: You have fulfilled your vow as prescribed. It is time to eat. Then do what needs to be done next.

Sāvitrī said: I shall eat when the sun has set after my desire has been fulfilled. Such is my heart's resolve; I have made this covenant.

This gives us some idea of the intensity of the *tapas* undertaken by her.

Conclusion: Reclaiming and Reenvisioning

It is time to bring matters to a conclusion. When Satī-Suttee-Sāvitrī are held as models for Hindu women to emulate, the usual presumption is they glorify the traditional values associated with women, and that they reinforce each other as models of such traditional virtue. If one examines the life of Sāvitrī closely, however, one finds that she should really be understood as a *countermodel* for such traditional values as (i) the birth of a son; (ii) the giving away of the girl to a husband selected by the parents; and (iii) recourse to suttee as a manifestation of extreme devotion to her husband. Sāvitrī does not conform to these.

Moreover, far from reinforcing Satī, who gives up her life for her husband's honor (much to his horror), or even the Suttee, who mounts the funeral pyre of her husband, Sāvitrī does no such thing, but through her *tapas* brings her husband back to live with her, rather than joining him in death. In this way, by examining Sāvitrī's life in some detail, one can reconstruct a new model for Indian women in terms of what Sāvitrī actually stood for, as distinguished from what Sāvitrī has been made to stand for.

The opposition between Satī and Sāvitrī however is not a case of total disjunction. In some ways they *both* positively reinforce the countermodel. For instance, in both cases, they chose their own husbands, and in both cases they chose them over the objections of their fathers. In the case of Satī, the father, Dakṣa, had actually pronounced a curse on the would-be husband because he had not paid homage to father Dakṣa on a particular occasion:

> Meanwhile Satī grew up and set her heart on Shiva, worshipping him in secret. She became of marriageable age, and her father held a *swayamvara*, (or "own-choice"), for her—where she would choose her desired husband amongst the gathered—to which he invited the gods and princes from far and near, (with the sole exception of Shiva, whom the father, Dakṣa, refused to recognize as a divine personage). Then Satī was borne into the great assembly, wreath in hand. But Shiva was nowhere to be seen, amongst the gods or men. Then in despair she cast her wreath into the air, calling upon Shiva to receive the garland; and behold he stood in the middle of the court with the wreath about his neck. Dakṣa had then no choice but to complete the marriage; and Shiva went away with Satī to his home in Mount Kailās. (Coomaraswamy and Nivedita 1967: 288)

In the case of Sāvitrī, her father asked her to find a groom for herself, as people felt too intimidated by her for him to find a husband for her. Interestingly, Manu says that if the father cannot find a husband for her, the daughter should find one herself. And Sāvitrī does. This raises two points for us to consider: (i) Should not the ideal of Sāvitrī be construed as suggesting that women should be encouraged to choose their husbands for themselves, rather than let the parents do so? (ii) Is it possible to be as devoted to one's husband as Satī and Sāvitrī were if one does not choose one's husband on one's own?

Thus, both narratives, as they have had such a profound impact on Hindu perceptions of ideal womanhood, need to be reclaimed with the aforementioned points in mind, and re-envisioned in ways that affirm the traditional spiritual power/energy (*tapas*) that have been

associated with women of profound ascetic capacity, but also in ways that recognize the necessity for women's self-agency and authority that should be the natural outcome—as it is for men—of the exercise of that capacity.

Notes

1. All the translations, unless indicated otherwise, are by the author, from the critical edition of the *Mahābhārata*: III. 277–III. 281.55.
2. This, at least in theory, seems to have been a daughter's *right*—that she could choose a man for herself right after puberty if her parents failed to find one. Some versions of the *Pañcatantra* contain a story in which the wife urges her husband to obtain a husband for their daughter who has now reached puberty, because, if he won't do so, the daughter will find one on her own because: "When a girl remains in her paternal home after menstruation, it is laid down that she should offer herself to a husband, choose her husband" (Kale, 1986: 475). The following Sanskrit verse attributes this position to Manu (227):

   ṛtumatyàm tu tiṣṭhantyāṁ svecchàdànam vidhīyate
   tasmàdudvàhayennagnàm manuḥ syàyambhuvo'bravīt.

3. "Among certain clans and lineages, the practice of Satī became closely linked with both the ideal of female virtue and the kshatriya tradition, and so with the honor and status of the clan" (Major, 2007: xxv).
4. Lipner, 1994: 262–263.

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CHAPTER 2

Female Beauty, Female Power: Seeing Devī in the *Saundarya Laharī*

Francis Xavier Clooney

Introduction

The *Saundarya Laharī* is a Sanskrit hymn of one hundred verses praising the Great Goddess, Devī, daughter of the mountain, beautiful consort of Śiva, lord of the three cities.[1] The hymn is popular and widely known, reproduced and commented upon. It has been translated into numerous Indian languages and a number of times into English. It is rooted in the context of South Indian tantra and is one of the more accessible flowerings of that tradition. Indeed, it seems of interest to scholars as a source of clues regarding its tantric context and what it tells us about tantra. Although by my reading the *Saundarya Laharī* is situated in that context in order to move beyond it toward a simpler and more public devotional discourse, and although my concern is to highlight how the *Saundarya Laharī* might contribute to a contemporary constructive Hindu/feminist theology,[2] a few words on the tantric context are nevertheless in order.

Tantra is an intellectual and ritual system that is notoriously hard to define, and we can be grateful to Andre Padoux (2002: 19) for highlighting a few distinctive features:

> The ideological aspect of the tantric vision is the cosmos as permeated by power (or powers), a vision wherein energy (*śakti*) is both cosmic and human and where the microcosm and macrocosm correspond and interact. The ideology is important because it explains such tantric features as the concept and practice of *kuṇḍaliṇī*, as well as a number of yogic and ritual practices for the use and control of that power. It also

> explains some aspects of the speculation and practices concerning the power of the word (*vāc*), especially the nature and power of mantras, and so forth. This ideology not only colors, but orients and organizes, and gives meaning to all tantric practices and observances.

Padoux goes on to note other features of tantrism that are distinctive, even if not unique: "the use of means pertaining to this world for supramundane ends" (20), particularly desire and pleasure, that are not to be renounced, but maximized, albeit for ultimately spiritual purposes. Included in this utilization of pleasure are transgressive practices such as those signaled in the famous five m's—drinking wine (*madya*), eating meat (*maṃsa*), fish (*matsya*), and fermented grain (*mudra*), and engaging in sexual intercourse (*maithuna*) outside of marriage.[3] Sexual desire is often objectified in a young, unmarried woman, and particularly in the female sexual organ. Finally, Padoux mentions some other distinctive features of tantra, such as the emphasis on ritual, the great esteem for mantras and their use in meditation, the fashioning of ritual diagrams (such as yantras, including the *Śrī Cakra* mentioned later), and ritual hand gestures.

The *Saundarya Laharī* is generally assumed to have been composed in the context of the Śrīvidyā ("auspicious wisdom") tradition, as Douglas Brooks puts it. By name she is primarily connected with Śiva and Śiva's deeds, since it is he who is famously "the destroyer of the three demon cities." She is invoked as Tripurā ("she of the three cities"), Tripurasundarī ("the lovely consort of [the lord of] the three cities"), or Śrī Lalitā Tripurasundarī ("the lovely goddess of the three cities"). But nowhere in the *Saundarya Laharī* is she called Tripurā, Tripurasundarī, or Śrī Lalitā Tripurasundarī, even if she is invoked as the spouse of Śiva who is the destroyer of the three cities. Devī bears her own set of mythological exploits. For instance, Brooks details the myth of the goddess as Lalita, destroyer of the demon Bhaṇḍa[4]; such a myth is perhaps background taken for granted by readers of the *Saundarya Laharī*. But the hymn itself is decidedly nonmythological and makes no mention of such acts.

As tantric, the *Saundarya Laharī* is part of a tradition that prizes the material and bodily as well as the spiritual and intellectual external beauty and also internalized norms of virtue, desire, and the renunciation of desire and of the female as well as the male.[5] Even spiritual advancement is marked according to physical and psychological mastery, particularly of the centers of power in the body known as the *cakras* (to which we will return later); these *cakras* are in the physical human body. In the *Saundarya Laharī*, however, they are

also comprehensive of the divine and human worlds, which are themselves included within Devī. On a ritual level, the *Saundarya Laharī* is recognized as one of the first examples we have of the cult of the goddess as the Śrī signified by the sacred diagram (yantra) known as the *Śrī Cakra*, and as evoked in her sacred name (mantra) of fifteen or sixteen syllables. But, again, such features in their specific detail seem largely to function as background elements in this hymn where Devī is seen directly, invoked directly, approached by one and all who have sufficient desire.

In the tantric context worship is transgressive of the dominant Brahmanical moral norms, and is aimed at overcoming traditionally settled boundaries by strategies such as the five m's mentioned earlier. The *Saundarya Laharī*, however, seems uninterested in any actual transgression such as might characterize its tantric background: no violations of dharma are described; no anti-Brahmanical claims are made. Even the complete physical description of Devī in the latter part of the hymn omits reference to her sexual organ, the description moving from her navel to her hips and down from there. Her breasts are described in detail, but primarily in terms of her role as mother. Yet the *Saundarya Laharī* also maintains inclusive values—such as nonelitism—that are defended by the transgression of all elitist boundaries; no thing and no one are beyond the realm of Devī.

That the hymn intends a wide audience is confirmed in the fact that it is attributed to the eighth-century Vedānta theologian Śaṃkara. It is one of many intellectual-devotional compositions grouped under his authorship. Even if there is little inclination among modern scholars to accept this attribution (and, accordingly, little need to accept as firm the eighth-century date), it is important to appreciate the significance awarded to the *Saundarya Laharī* by attributing it to one of the most important of all Hindu intellectuals. This is a measure of the esteem in which the hymn is held but also, I suggest, a sign that it is meant for wide use, composed by a renowned author whose contribution to Indian religious and intellectual life is popularly portrayed as public and for the benefit of all. As his composition, the *Saundarya Laharī* in a sense offers a public face for traditions, tantric and others, that could have remained largely inaccessible, preserved for an elite few. The hymn does presume learning, and does not repeat all that needs to be known—much remains implicit in the background—but it is largely informative in what it says, positioning Devī and the cult of Devī in relation to a complex religious background abbreviated and streamlined for this hymnic representation. It appears as a devotional hymn accessible to the devout, with few strictures about its

audience or decipherment—other than expectations related to proper acknowledgment of Devī's primary role as inspiring the poet and the devotee.[6]

In the following pages I work with the notion that the *Saundarya Laharī* is communicative and not essentially secret or entirely dependent upon the skills of initiate readers. It is one thing to admit, as I certainly do, that prolonged study with a learned practitioner is a marvelously helpful practice; but it would raise a more daunting barrier to insist that its real meaning is in essence unavailable without a teacher. Though evocative of a complex religious world that goes well beyond the one hundred verses, the *Saundarya Laharī* nonetheless invites us to read it as a coherent, theoretical, and practical exposition of the approach to Devī, an approach that subsumes and simplifies that background. It is not fundamentally esoteric, even if its context has strong esoteric elements, since it does not conceal its major points regarding the devout meditation on Devī. It is a Sanskrit-language poetic document, meant to be used—heard, recited, read, studied—and is quite clearly accessible, to an important extent, even without the otherwise invaluable guidance of a teacher.

Devī as a "Conventional Great Goddess"

Let us now turn to the thealogical content of the *Saundarya Laharī* and its thealogy of Devī, the focus of this essay. At the start of the hymn Devī is proclaimed Śiva's power; without her he cannot act. She is his consort yet the one on whom he depends; she is transcendent and yet irresistibly approachable to devotees who wish to praise her. Devī's power is subtle; she is not a warrior goddess who asserts herself violently to dominate or even to conquer evil. She is power, and so does not exercise power. She is life, vitality, beauty, desire, and conquers accordingly. Almost no mythology of Devī appears in the *Saundarya Laharī*, while references to the mythology of her consort Śiva are relatively more frequent. Yet it is only by her pleasure, in her pleasure, that other beings have their place. On her depend the gods and goddesses, all lesser-conscious beings, and the entire universe. She is manifest in the centers of physical and psychological energy in the body known as the *cakras*, visualized abstractly in the geometric detail of yantras and particularly in the *Śrī Cakra*, and manifest as sound in her precious sixteen-syllable mantra name. Visualizable as a beautiful woman, she is also settled in a rather standard and expected cultural frame that is used and reused to great effect. A mother, she

remains the most beautiful of women, the one upon whose figure one gazes in loving detail in order to gain the liberation that is the fullness of bliss, desire entirely, endlessly satisfied. She is lovely, her figure is full, and she even dresses better than anyone else. While she surpasses every conventional image and standard mode of contemplation, she must be seen, since only by that vision is bliss attainable. By design the *Saundarya Laharī* aims at this contemplation of beauty; accordingly, "*Saundarya Laharī*" is by tradition the name of the whole as well as the name of the second part of the hymn (vv. 42–91).

Of course, it is neither novel nor helpful to discover that a "woman is there primarily to be looked at." However lofty the characterization of Devī's beauty, one might argue that she turns out to be a superwoman far removed from the realm of ordinary women; the promises made regarding male prosperity and desire might indicate that she is simply a high-level projection of male fantasies. I suggest, on the contrary, that the point of the hymn is to receive, deconstruct, and restore the image of Devī as a beautiful woman, to make it a viable religious goal that both takes into account and also transforms ordinary cultural expectations. Her beauty is remarkable and the correct object of worship and pleasure, but it is accessible in its potent fullness only after an ascesis of tantric distillation and by way of an assertion of a post-tantric devotion as the premier way of access to Devī.

The key problem addressed by the *Saundarya Laharī* is therefore the *sādhana* (spiritual practice) by which blissful union with Devī is to be achieved: ostensibly ordinary worship, with extraordinary results, a refined version of tantric bhakti. This transformation is achieved by the reception and reuse of ordinary conceptions of woman, and standard bhakti approaches to the divine, for the sake of a more nuanced and effective appropriation of the divine reality.

The hymn may be divided according to this outline:

1. Thesis: Śiva needs Śakti (v. 1)
2. Traditional opening praise (vv. 2–7)
3. A purification and distillation of the worship of Devī (vv. 8–41)
4. A new viewing of Devī (vv. 42–91)
5. A climactic entrance into Devī's love chamber (vv. 92–95)
6. Traditional closing praise (vv. 96–100)

Let us first review the frame structure of the hymn, the thesis stated in verse 1, and the representation of traditional praise in verses 2–7

and 96–100. The thesis of the *Saundarya Laharī* is stated in the first verse:

> 1. Only joined with Power has the God power to rule, otherwise
> He cannot even quiver.

The verse continues with a corollary about other deities:

> You are worthy of adoration by Hari, Hara, Viriñci, and all the rest,

This is in turn personalized in light of the author's own condition:

> How dare I who've done nothing meritorious reverence and praise
> You?

The full thealogical ambition of the *Saundarya Laharī* is implicit in this first verse, and one might say that the rest of its verses elaborate, defend, and apply its thesis. How Śiva relates to Devī is a theme to which the *Saundarya Laharī* returns regularly. Verse 34 indicates that Devī is Śiva's body, but also that she is his self as well; ultimately they are mutually dependent and unable to live apart:

> You are the body of Śambhu, the sun and the moon are your breasts, my lady, and so too I reflect on your self as the flawless self of Bhava. This relation—that which depends, that on which all depends—is common to you both, both of you intent on the highest bliss in a single taste.[7]

Later in this essay (in commenting on vv. 35–41) we shall see how Śiva and his consort function within Devī's *cakras*, and then too (in the "Flood of Beauty") how Śiva "performs" in the social setting created by Devī's beauty. The promises early in the hymn are, as it were, a tease; it will only be at the end of the entirety of the hymn that the repeatedly deferred intimate pleasure of Śiva and Devī seems to reach satisfaction (vv. 92–95), a satisfaction involving a wide range of other beings, including the viewer.

In the opening scenario and the concluding colophon, Devī is portrayed as a classic deity of beauty and power:

> 2. Brahmā gathered the tiniest speck of dust from Your lotus feet and fashioned a world lacking nothing; with much effort Indra carries the same on his thousand heads; Śiva pulverizes it and rubs it on like ash.

3. For the ignorant, You are the island-city of light illumining their inner darkness; for the dull-witted, honey streaming from the flower bouquet of consciousness; for the destitute, a double for the wish-fulfilling jewel; for those drowning in the ocean of births, the tusk of Mura's enemy, the boar lifting them up: that's how You are.

4. The league of gods, other than You, dispels fear and bestows boons with two hands, and only You have no need to make boon-bestowing and fear-dispelling gestures—by themselves Your feet are able to protect from fear and bestow boons beyond desire, as You afford shelter to every world.

5. You bestow prosperity on those who make obeisance before You, and thus once, after adoring You, Hari assumed the form of a damsel and fascinated even the destroyer of cities; Memory too worshipped You and became powerful enough to infatuate even great sages, his frame fit for licking by Pleasure's eyes;

6. He has no limbs but carries a bow made of flowers, a bow-string of bees, five arrows, his servant is spring, the mountain breeze his chariot: thus armed, O daughter of the snow-capped mountain, still he obtains grace only from Your glance, and by that conquers the whole world single-handedly.

7. O great pride of the vanquisher of cities, with jingling girdle You stoop under breasts like the frontal globes of a young elephant, You are slim of waist, Your face like the autumnal full moon, in Your hands are bow, arrows, noose and goad: may You stand forth before us!

The conclusion of the *Saundarya Laharī* returns to a similar straightforward praise:

96. How many poets have not courted the wife of Vidhaṭṛ? Which poet does not become the Lord of the goddess Śrī, whatever his wealth? O foremost among good women, except for the great God, embracing Your breasts is not easily accomplished even by the *kuravaka* tree.

97. The knowers of the traditions call You the goddess of letters, the wife of Druhina, Padmā, wife of Hari, companion of Hara, daughter of the mountain, but You are also that fourth state, unsurpassed and hard to attain splendor, the great Māyā, and so You make everything unsteady, O queen of highest Brahman.

98. I desire wisdom, mother, so tell me, when I shall drink that essence of chewed betel juice reddened with lac dye, the water that washed Your feet, the essence of betel from Vānī's lotus mouth that makes poets even of those mute by birth?

99. Whoever is devoted to You will play with Sarasvatī and Lakṣmī, rival Vidhi and Hari, have a beautiful form that melts even Pleasure's chastity, live a long life free from the bonds that bind beasts, and enjoy the taste known as "highest bliss."

> 100. Illumining the sun with small flames, bathing the moon whence nectar flows with drops from moonstones, satisfying the ocean with its own drops of water—and me too, praising You with Your own words, O mother of all words.

By my reading, and without ignoring the rich complexities surely latent in the text, these verses offer a largely unproblematic and accessible representation of the sentiments and practices related to the worship of Devī. One seeks her presence, surrenders to her, gropes for the appropriate words and acts, and worships her as best one can. This is the frame for the two inner sections of the *Saundarya Laharī*, to which we shall now turn; but the overall point is that one can imagine beginning from ordinary worship, and returning to that ordinary worship—even if for the transformed practitioner the ordinary is now steeped in deeper spiritual insight and power.

Deconstructing Devī in the "Flood of Bliss" (vv. 8–41)

If the framing verses present her in a fairly traditional manner, the "Flood of Bliss" section (vv. 8–41) takes apart and recomposes that image in a way that is strikingly abstract and yet at the same time powerfully charged. The most complex features of the *Saundarya Laharī* are specific to the tantric tradition that stands as background to the portrayal of Devī in the "Flood of Bliss." In the "Flood of Bliss" we see an exalted deity, praised superlatively, possessed of extraordinary powers, and signified in a densely codified language that is (partially) unpacked in the elaborate commentaries on the hymn. The "Flood of Bliss" offers a careful deconstruction of the goddess tradition by means of a tantric rarification that, in turn, is itself deconstructed, so that Devī turns out to be the nearby but elusive *différance* of the divine; in the "Flood of Beauty," this *différance* will be enunciated anew, revisualized, in terms that are both direct and ironic.

Earlier tantras may have been thought to have defined her subtle reality, but they are nonetheless relegated to a secondary position, inferior and misleading with respect to this new tantra—her tantra—that Śiva brings to earth:

> 31. After deceiving all the worlds by the sixty-four tantras dependent on the perfections attributed to them Paśupati rested, but due to his connection with You He once again brought down to earth Your tantra which of its own accord accomplishes all human goals at once.

The point is not how many tantras there are, or the importance of knowing them, but only the superiority of her new path over those complex and lesser paths. While the commentators meticulously list the tantras, that information does not seem to be the author's concern.

To understand the use and reuse of tantric resources in an economic fashion, I highlight three key strategies of "tantrification": spiritual-material (with respect to the *cakras*), the visual (with respect to the *Śrī Cakra*), and the auditory (with respect to Devī's holy mantra name).[8] These presume and build on the claim (v. 1) that Devī is the Power of Śiva. First, the *Saundarya Laharī* situates Devī with respect to the *cakras*, material/spiritual centers of power that, in other texts but not here, are usually located in the subtle body with correspondence to specific bodily locations: anus (*mūlādhāra*), genitals (*svādhiṣṭhāna*), navel (*maṇipura*), heart (*anāhata*), throat (*viśuddhi*), brow (*ājñā*), and along with these *cakras*, a point at the top of the head (*sahasrāra*). It is not clear whether the *cakras* are somehow inside Devī's own form, or simply her domain. In verses 36 ff., the *cakras* are described as belonging to her; in them Śiva resides. Here too there is a rich evocation of traditional knowledge in order to assert Devī's freedom with respect to those *cakras*:

> 9. You pierce earth in the *mūlādhāra cakra*, water in the *maṇipura cakra*, fire in the *svādhiṣṭhāna cakra*, wind in the *anāhata cakra* and the ether above that, and mind in the *cakra* between the brows; thus You pierce the entire kula path and then take pleasure with Your Lord in the secrecy of the thousand petaled lotus.
>
> 10. You sprinkle the evolved world with a stream of nectar flowing from beneath Your feet, and from the resplendent abundance of the nectar moon You descend to Your own place, making Yourself a serpent of three and a half coils, and there You sleep again in the cave deep within the foundation.

As the *kuṇḍalini*, she moves freely up and down through the *cakras*; they belong to her as her domain. Verses 14 and 21 seem to reflect on her brilliance surging even beyond the *cakras*—that is, beyond the corresponding elements and lotuses:

> 14. Fifty-six rays in earth, fifty-two in water, sixty-two in fire, fifty-four in air, seventy-two in the heavens, sixty-four in the mind: but far above them all are Your lotus feet.
>
> 21. Slender as a streak of lightning, the essence of sun, moon, and fire; though seated in the great forest of lotuses, You stand high above

> even the six lotuses; if great souls in whose minds impurity and illusion are obliterated look upon You, they gain a flood of highest delight.

Later we shall return to the *cakras* at the climax of the "Flood of Bliss," but for now it suffices to see that the *cakra* system is valorized—as subordinate to her.

A second strategy aimed at locating Devī with respect to the tantric tradition and purifying her image of extraneous cultural influences comes by way of attention to the refined, geometrical form of the *Śrī Cakra*. As a complex web of intersecting triangles with bordering margins and a central single point, the *Śrī Cakra* symbolizes the interplay of Śiva and Śakti in their cosmic roles and cosmic play. Almost every edition of the *Saundarya Laharī* includes a reproduction of the *Śrī Cakra*, and occasionally also yantra designs for each verse.

Even if the *Śrī Cakra* is crucial and central, in the *Saundarya Laharī* its importance is downplayed:

> 11. Nine base components—four Śrī-triangles and five Śiva-triangles—around a distinct center point, plus lotuses of eight and sixteen petals, three rings and three bordering lines: thus, altogether Your angle-home evolves as forty-three.

Verse 19 seems to suggest a meditation on her form—her face—as symbolized in the *Śrī Cakra*. The pleasure of seeing her is deflected, at this point in the *Saundarya Laharī* she cannot be observed directly.

> 19. Making your face the center point, under that your breasts, and under that one half of Hara: whoever thus meditates on your desire portion, O Hara's queen, at once fascinates women easily, but very soon he unsettles even the goddess of the three worlds who has the sun and the moon for breasts.

That the *Śrī Cakra* should be referred to so minimally, twice, and *only twice*, does not mean that the author dismissed its importance, or saw it as unnecessary for practitioners using the *Saundarya Laharī*. Perhaps it is very important. Nonetheless, this reference too has a primarily practical purpose, the subordination of the *Śrī Cakra* to Devī. It is her abode; it is not identified with her; she can be approached by other and better means.

The reduction of her name to pure sound in the form of mantra is a third rarification of Devī and renders her form more subtle. In the *Saundarya Laharī* Devī is usually addressed in the second person. Most of the names by which she is invoked are simply standard references to Parvatī/Umā, the consort of Śiva[9]: she is the "daughter of

the mountain lord" (vv. 6, 12, 58, 75, 76, 78, 81), Umā (vv. 47, 71), the consort of Śarva (v. 60), "Śivā" (Devī as the female power associated with Śiva; vv. 25, 32, 35, 43, 57, 77), and even Śambhu's grace (v. 93).[10] She is occasionally addressed as Goddess (vv. 72, 80, 88, 91), and also as Mother (vv. 17, 28, 39, 64, 65, 74, 76, 77, 84, 87, 98). In general, though, the point seems to be that names specifying her as a particular sectarian deity are ruled out; she is marked in terms of her relation to Śiva, as Parvatī, but we get the impression that no great conclusions are to be drawn from this marking.

Only in several other places do we find more elaborate claims about her name, most importantly in verses 32–33, which indicate a secret name for Devī, words encoding a mysterious, subtle articulation of her name:

> 32. "Śivā," "power," "desire," "earth," and "sun," "cool-rayed moon," "memory," "swan," "Śakra," and "the higher," "death," and "Hari:" when these syllables are joined together, and finished with the triple heart syllable, they become the parts of Your name, O mother.

The names have some meaning in themselves, but the commentators read them as markers for encoded syllables, to each set of which *hrīṃ* (the heart syllable) is added:

> ka + e + ī + la + hrīṃ (= 5)
> ha + sa + ka + ha + la + hrīṃ (= 6)
> sa + ka + la + hrīṃ (= 4)

Noting a tradition that Devī's name has sixteen and not just fifteen syllables, Lakṣmīdhara informs us that the sixteenth syllable is ś + r + ī + ṃ. Verse 33 extends her name by prefixing another syllable to it, "smara, yoni, lakṣmī," or, in the tantric calculus, klīṃ + hrīṃ + śrīṃ:

> 33. Eternal one, some people with a taste for great, uninterrupted pleasure place the triad "memory," "womb," and "prosperity" before Your mantra and worship You with rosaries strung with jewels that grant desires, they offer hundreds of oblations, streams of butter from the cow Surabhi flowing onto the fire of Śiva.

Her name thus turns out to be enunciated as follows:

> klīṃ + hrīṃ + śrīṃ[11]
> ka + e + ī + la + hrīṃ
> ha + sa + ka + ha + la + hrīṃ
> sa + ka + la + hrīṃ
> śrīṃ

There is no other reference to the mantra-name in the *Saundarya Laharī*; it seems probable that the point is to acknowledge and include the mantra in the repertoire of claims made about Devī and in praise of her.

These reflections on Devī as power (v. 1) and then on her materiality as the *cakras*, her visible form as the *Śrī Cakra*, and her name as mantra are all preparatory to the final verses of the "Flood of Bliss," verses 34–41. Here we find an enactment of the thesis proposed in verse 1: our conception of her now purified of grosser identifications, Devī can be meditated on as possessed of the *cakras* in which Śiva resides. In verse 34, his intention to reflect on her thoughtfully (*manana*) is stated:

> 34. You are the body of Śambhu, the sun and the moon are Your breasts, my lady, and I contemplate Your self as the flawless nine-fold self; this relation—that which depends, that on which all depends—is common to You both, both of You intent on the highest bliss in one simple taste.[12]
>
> 35. You are mind, You are air, You are wind and the rider of wind, You are water, You are earth, beyond You as You evolve there is nothing higher, there is only You, and when You transform Yourself by every form, then You take the form of consciousness and bliss as a way of being, O Śiva's youthful one!

Verses 36–41 suggest purer and clearer worship that perhaps balances the more standard worship offered in verses 2–7. The preliminary notion that Devī can be distanced as an object of worship has been discarded, and so now she is reverenced rather indirectly by the worship of Śiva and his consorts *within* her:

> 36. I salute the supreme Śambhu who abides in Your *ājñā cakra*, shining with the radiance of countless suns and moons, at His side embraced by Highest Consciousness; by worshipping Him with devotion, we begin to live in that region of light beyond the reach of sun and moon and fire too, the place no sorrow can touch.
>
> 37. In Your *viśuddhi cakra* I worship Śiva as clear as pure crystal, the source of air itself, and I also worship the goddess, in act the same as Śiva; by the radiance of these two as they travel the path to a oneness in form with the moon's rays, the universe has banished its inner darkness and dances with joy like a partridge.
>
> 38. I worship the pair of swans whose only taste is the honey of the blooming wisdom lotus, who somehow cross the mind lake of the great ones, from whose chatter emanate the eighteen forms of knowledge, who extract all quality from what is flawed, like milk from water.

39. I glorify the dissolver who, quieted, sets fire in Your *svādhiṣṭhāna cakra*, O mother, and also His great Samayā goddess; when His glance, fueled with great anger, burns the worlds, her glance, moist with compassion, serves to cool it.

40. The rainbow lit with power shining against the darkness, gems sparkling diversely, set among jewels, the dark-blue cloud finding its only refuge in Your jeweled city and showering all three worlds scorched by Hara and the sun: that I worship.

41. In Your *mūlādhāra cakra* I contemplate the one whose self is nine-fold, who dances wildly in all nine moods with His Samayā goddess also intent on the dance; these two indicate with compassion the way to ascend, they rule, and so this world recognizes its mother and father.

It is striking that these concluding verses do not mirror verse 1 exactly: there is no complete pairing of Devī and Śiva, while he and his consort(s) somehow remain a reality "within" her large, complete reality. Śiva and his consorts are included in the reality of the "you" to whom the hymn is directed; above and beyond the *cakras* with their accompanying mythology and imagery, and beyond the god and goddess imagined within the world of the *cakras*, stands the all-encompassing Devī herself. As we shall see, it is only in verses 91–95 that their complete unity is reimagined in full clarity once again.

By my reading, a tantric analysis contributes to the *Saundarya Laharī* a demythologization and rarification of the Devī tradition. Her public image is deconstructed; ordinary and simply received material, anthropomorphic conceptions of her are put aside. But so too, the notion that she is accessible only in tantra is itself deconstructed. There is as it were a triumph of bhakti over tantra, a "post-tantrification" of the understanding of Devī. Already in the "Flood of Bliss" but, as we shall now see, more completely in the "Flood of Beauty," the goal is a unitive vision of Devī.

The Aesthetic and Dramatic Representation of Devī in the "Flood of Beauty" (vv. 42–91)

Most commentators, traditional and modern, have focused their energies and interests on the "Flood of Bliss," mining it as a source of information on the tantric tradition; they have shown much less interest in the second major part of the hymn, the "Flood of Beauty." By the standard line of thinking, one might see the contemplation of Śiva and his consort(s) in her *cakras* in verses 36–41 as the culmination of

the whole *Saundarya Laharī*; accordingly, the remaining, major portion of the text would become a rather large appendix to an already complete whole.[13]

In the *Saundarya Laharī* as we have it, however, it is the "Flood of Bliss" that is preparatory to the "Flood of Beauty," and thus in service of a more important visualization—or revisualization—of Devī who is to be contemplated head to toe. There are no directives given in the "Flood of Beauty," which is rather straightforward and vivid in a kind of first-person eye-witness account of Devī's beauty, giving the impression that the poet is engaged in meditation and reporting on what is seen. This is a key action in keeping with what was stated at the end of the introductory section of the *Saundarya Laharī* before the "Flood of Bliss":

> 7. O great pride of the vanquisher of cities, with jingling girdle You stoop under breasts like the frontal globes of a young elephant, You are slim of waist, Your face like the autumnal full moon, in Your hands are bow, arrows, noose and goad: may You stand forth before us!

The "Flood of Beauty" fulfills the wish to see her directly. After the "Flood of Bliss" has cleared away uncritical stereotypes, a rejuvenated vision can take place. Conversely, the visualizations of the "Flood of Beauty" promote the main goal of the *Saundarya Laharī*, the engagement in a direct encounter with Devī that is posterior to and transcendent of the tantric tradition out of which the hymn was generated.[14]

Each verse focuses on a particular aspect or detail—the crown on her head, hair, vermilion forehead mark, eyebrows, eyes and glance, ears, nose, teeth, smile, tongue, betel nut in her mouth, singing, throat, hands, breasts, navel, waist, hips, thighs, feet, toes, nails, gait—as a physical and religious referent regarding which a particular point or suggestion may be made. Each occasions some direct or oblique praise of her, by way of some comparison and contrast framed in terms of a natural or social or mythological reference. In most, some result or opportunity for the appreciative viewer is stated or implied. It is noticeable throughout that this beauty is not voided by a shift to a spiritual interpretation. Each detail is given a spiritual value and (often) spiritual cause, but the "surface" is not discarded for the sake of the "interior." Observation of Devī is rather enacted, dramatized in a scenario where Devī interacts with other divine and human agents. Let us see how this works in a few verses.

Verse 42 initiates the process by envisioning not Devī's head but the crown resting upon it:

> 42. If someone praises Your golden crown inlaid with every jeweled sky-gem, O daughter of the snow-capped mountain, won't he imagine it the crescent moon made manifold by the luster spreading from the varied gems set there, or Śunāsīra's bow?

The implication is twofold: the outright beauty of the crown, and the way in which the poet's mind is affected by it. The dynamic is established in a visualization shifting from the crown to the moon, and then from the moon to Śunāsīra's bow, the rainbow. By imagining the verses for themselves and savoring the scene and even the subtle suggestive language, readers are invited to share the state of mind of the speaker who is bewildered enough by what he sees; he draws out the association: her crown, the crescent moon, rainbow. Such vision from the start evokes insight and a mood—here a mood of confusion—in the viewer; along with the first-person voice in the hymn, the listener/reader is put into a position where multiple insights overlap and as it were confuse one another.

That Devī's ears are beautiful is just the beginning of the little scene presented in verse 50, since those same ears are also actively enjoying the praises directed to Devī, and their involvement in turn engages her eyes:

> 50. The poets' anthology, the honey of a flower bouquet in which alone Your ears delight, while Your two eyes never stop glancing, like bees—or young elephants—eager to swallow all nine subtle tastes, while the eye in Your forehead sees all this and becoming jealous turns a bit red.

The ears are captivated by song, the two eyes by the ears, the third eye is uncomfortable in jealousy when it is faced with that preoccupation of the first two eyes. Included is a powerful aesthetic claim, of course, the swallowing of the nine *rasa*s, and even this is ironicized by the reference to the third eye's immediate jealousy.[15] In this way the simple act of praising her ears is richly complexified and deepened by putting it in the context of the pleasures of the ear—music, poetry—where Devī is active and in ownership of her pleasures, and by creating a drama by which to reinterpret how the eyes respond to the ears, and by investing even the redness with an active engagement in the scene. One sees Devī's ears and eyes, and by viewing them

one also rediscovers human delights and courtesies—not merely subsumed in a higher divine reality, but rather reenergized there, made all the more splendid.

Even the most ordinary feature can be taken as suggestive of a spiritual meaning. Her nose is aquiline and adorned with a pearl; it is thus, by a classical Indian convention, supple and smooth like bamboo:

> 61. O banner on the bamboo staff of the snowcapped mountain, Your nose too is a bamboo, and may it soon bear us our proper fruit—just as inside it bears pearls fashioned by Your very cool breath, and in its abundance carries a pearl on the outside too.

In turn, the reference to bamboo serves to help explain the fact of the pearl adorning her nose since popular tradition held that pearls are produced from within bamboo. The coldness of the mountains, the delicacy of her features—like bamboo—and her ornament, all coalesce to make this view of her a promise of abundance for those willing to see.

According to verse 85, it is fine enough that Śiva and Devī kick each other during their lovers' quarrels; but now the Kankeli tree, itself unknowing and fruitless, yearns for the touch of her feet in order to be made fruitful again:

> 85. We speak words of reverence for Your feet, so very lovely to the eyes, bright, freshly painted with lac dye—even the Lord of beasts grows extremely jealous of the *kaṅkeli* tree in Your pleasure garden that so ardently desires Your kick.

If kicked, the tree will flourish, so Śiva wants to be like the tree, since by the touch of her foot his own fertility would come to fruition. The observer is similarly thrust into the scene: it is not enough to contemplate her foot—"if only she would kick me with it." We find here echoes of the discussion of jealousy already noted at verse 50.[16] We can also see here how the poet has imaginatively filled out the image of Śiva in relation to Devī: both exist, both are divine; they play, and he is psychologically at a disadvantage.

The complex and tense beauty of Devī is viewed and imagined to be an active force even in the world of "ordinary" sense experiences and relationships and moods. There is nothing about this divine woman that is merely passive or inert, or so ethereal as to be comprised of matter in name only. By implication, every slight and small

portion of her generates well-being for the devotee. Observation and the contagion of desire go together, and the simplest of observations becomes charged with insights that go deeper and suggest new possibilities for the viewer. There is no question of either avoiding the material specificities of the image or of taking it merely as a physical feature. But the vehicle of deeper meaning remains attention to aspects of the evident and visible object of sight, configured, accented in resemblances, comparisons, and emotions. There is spiritual meaning, but deeper meanings do not cancel out meanings more quickly evident to the senses.

To sharpen our view of how Devī is a woman according to conventional expectations while at the same time extraordinary too, let us conclude this section by noting the treatment of Devī's breasts in verses 72–75. We see here how thoroughly constructive and active is the author's imagination in producing the verses (plus the commentators' skill in reading them). For the breasts—one of the quintessential symbols of "woman"—are thoughtfully imagined and complexified here, with a rejection of any notion that they might be the passive object of the male gaze.

In 72, the contemplation of her breasts is unexpectedly enriched by a moment of uncertainty on Gaṇeśa's part; in childlike doubt, he touches the frontal lobes of his head—as if they were her breasts—and this provokes the laughter of those watching:

> 72. Goddess, Your breasts, ever flowing with milk are sucked at once by Skanda and the Elephant-faced; when Herambha noticed this his heart was unsettled by doubt and he touched his own frontal globes with his trunk—thwack!—and provoked laughter; may they banish our affliction too.[17]

Devī's breasts cause joy in her children, including puzzlement in Gaṇeśa who confuses the breasts with his own frontal lobes. Implied, of course, is that those breasts might also enlighten and entertain viewers who come to share in the laughter of the family, surprised like Gaṇeśa and enjoying the experience.

Verse 73 presents a different kind of problem, a puzzle and a tantalizing promise of eternal childhood:

> 73. Are Your breasts jeweled vessels filled with ambrosial essence? There is no quiver of doubt in our minds, O standard of the mountain Lord: Your sons Dviradavadana and Krauñca-breaker drink there, and do not know the taste of women; even today they are children.

The rich gift of her breast milk gives life and keeps young—and innocent—her sons Skanda and Gaṇeśa; by implication, the viewer is invited to drink and obtain immortality and eternal youthfulness. Here again the question of practice arises, since it is easy enough to conjecture that the unstated invitation is to engage in a consumption of Devī in order to obtain similar results. Only implied is the sense that the same paradoxical consumption and abstinence could occur in the viewer as well; overall, the viewer is left puzzled as to the vessel-breast simile, and whether, to what extent, those who drink of Devī really are children forever.[18]

By a striking shift in mood and image, verse 74 portrays a more violent scene: the bone necklace resting on her breasts, taken this time from a slain elephant:

> 74. Mother, Your breasts wear a luminous garment delicate as a creeper and are strung with pearls made from Stamberamadanuja's skull; just as the fame of the vanquisher of the cities is enhanced by His valor. Their innate luster is refracted by the radiance of Your red bimba fruit lips.

We see an emphasis on the power of the breasts, which are by implication connected with the destruction of the demon elephant. The breasts are not merely objects of the observer's view; adorned with the necklace of the elephant demon, they are radiant with their own power, hot like the valor of Śiva, who himself was a conqueror too. His valor in battle is rivaled by her beauty—her lips—and by implication his valor is thus defeated. The red of her lips, the red of his valor, and the red of the elephant's blood deepen one another.

In a final shift, verse 75 focuses on the power of the milk generated by her breasts:

> 75. Daughter of the earth-bearing mountain, in Your breasts I picture the milk ocean of poetry flowing from Your heart; when by Your compassion the Draviḍa child drinks there, he becomes the most desired of great poets.

While the commentators speculate on the identity of the Draviḍa ("southern") child, the emphasis is on the life-giving nourishment of her breasts, their prodigious generosity, and how their milk—"from the heart"—is generative of great skill in poetry. By implication, both the author and the readers are able to be energized and inspired.

Neither the verses nor the commentaries on them display Devī's breasts in a way that reduces them or her to passive objects of a consuming male gaze. Contemplation is clearly not a review of inert images or detached body parts. Her breasts are not mere objects of view, but as the cited verses show, they energize, empower, give life, and overcome those entering into social relationships with her; she is a woman due to these breasts, but these breasts remind us how powerful Devī is. The viewing is a contemplation of her body and its particular parts as expressive of her power as this generates its own natural, social, and mythic context. By implication, too, viewers are drawn into the scene on which they reflect; they are invited to become engaged, consuming, changed, confused, and instructed. The "Flood of Beauty" is, rather, a contemplation of Devī in relationship to her lively world, at play in a world of deities, natural wonders, and human desires; by perception of her beauty one glimpses an engaging, pleasurable drama of beauty-in-action. In it, of course, the beautiful person rules those with whom she is in contact, by her beauty, which is her *śakti*.

Every aspect of Devī thus occasions a rich natural and social divine scenario in which her physical beauty repeatedly appears as generative of her surroundings. Devī is not the passive object of the male gaze, even if males are supposed to be taking a long look at her. Several features of this visualization are notable. First, there is a direct and unproblematic focus on the female form as beautiful. It is described in (nearly complete) detail, which for the most part does not signal by appearance any material differences from a human female form; only grandeur and glory distinguish her female body. Second, the beauty and the visualization of it are complexified by the elaboration of dramatic scenarios for each verse, involving other divine persons and scenes from nature and religion that are transformed in the light of her beauty. As a beautiful woman, she is thus conceived as the active and dynamic transformer of the visual process, and not merely as its passive object. Third, by direct statement and indirect suggestion, extraordinary results are attributed to this visualization; the energies underlying Devī's extraordinary beauty and the powers of deities and Śiva who contemplate and enjoy her eternally are made available to persons engaged in visualization, those who are willing to look and enjoy.

That the commentators read the verses according to figures of speech is of course not surprising. The verses are elegant Sanskrit compositions that merit sophisticated reading. But there is also the additional point that in their view the visualization they are describing

must add up to more than can be expressed in simple description: the indirection and suggestion, the psychological states attended to, are noticed by the effects that occur in the person who contemplates Devī and allows the experience to have its effect. Lakṣmīdhara and Kāmeśvara Sūri (the commentators I have read most closely) read each verse in the "Flood of Beauty" as suggestive of moods and insights not directly expressible in prose. What it means to see Devī can be said/described only indirectly, and the words of the verses aim skillfully at generating the elusive insights and moods. Appearances are attentively noted, described elegantly, and thereby even rendered generative of deeper experiences of what appears. Devī is beautiful and a pleasure to behold, but the more one sees her, the more one can see more deeply into the power radiated in that beauty. Every detail of her form thus becomes a material symbol of inner truth, a kind of sacramental sign, not to be replaced by the deeper insights. Their strategy for indicating the surfeit of significance over the limits of words is to use the classic figures of speech (*alaṃkāra*) that show how the subtle variations in description and mood expressed in the verses serve to indicate indirectly aspects of Devī's power, splendor, and beauty. Although the "Flood of Beauty" obviously points us to visualization, the commentarial view is that intrinsic to that richer visualization is the skillful nuances of words that, by suggesting more than they are really able to say, "show" us more than we can really see in simple acts of looking.

Climax

After the deconstructive move of the "Flood of Bliss" and the consequent "second gaze" of the "Flood of Beauty," it becomes finally possible for the poet to imagine and utter, albeit imperfectly and in a teasingly incomplete fashion, the full richness of the union of Devī and Śiva. The conclusion of the hymn in a sense shows us where the practice of the "Flood of Bliss" followed by the "Flood of Beauty" leads, but it also leaves the student/reader at the edge of bliss. Verses 92–95 extend the meditation on Devī's feet by a straightforward, imaginative approach to the lush and sensuous chamber where she reclines:

> 92. Your servants, Druhiṇa, Hari, Rudra, and Īśvara form Your couch, and Śiva seems a bedsheet of transparent hue, as if the subtle erotic sentiment were embodied, red in desire, reflecting Your radiance, and milking the pleasure in Your eyes.

93. Her hair is curly, She is simple in nature, gentle in smile; in Her frame She is soft as a *śirīṣa* flower yet in the region of Her breasts hard like rock; at the waist She is quite slim but at the hips prodigious: She triumphs, She protects the world, Śambhu's grace, Aruṇā.

94. The moon's dark spot is musk, while its watery reflection is a canister of emerald filled with lumps of camphor, its phases; when day by day this is emptied for Your enjoyment, Vidhi fills it over and over, just for You.

95. You are the inner precinct of the cities' foe and so the goal of worshipping Your feet is not easily accomplished by those with feeble senses, and so the immortals, Śatamakha in front, achieve unequalled perfection—with Aṇimā and the others who stand at Your doorway.

By implication the listener is being invited to enter that precinct, into her presence, to touch her feet, to ascend onto her couch. He/she has gained this access by working through the preceding 91 verses, both the purification of the understanding of Devī, and the revisualization of her. Once the devotee is in her presence though, nothing more is said about what occurs there. It is left to the person who has come that far, to experience, see, and enjoy Devī in actual encounter.[19]

To summarize: the tantric analysis of bliss distills and refines experience so as to uncover direct, immediate experience of Devī as power. But one is then enabled to see her again in loving detail, and to be flooded by the cumulative experience of her beauty and the moods and relationships it generates. In the "Flood of Bliss," conventional devotion is taken apart, analyzed, and with reference to tantric strategies given a new epistemological weight unencumbered by ordinary social expectations of female beauty. Bridging the gap between popular images of goddesses and esoteric and highly elite refinements of her representation, it makes Devī knowable in a new way. While the commentarial reading reintroduces an elite perspective—particular knowledge is amplified at great length, the importance of the privileged teacher-disciple relation is stressed—the "Flood of Bliss" nonetheless seems rather intent upon downplaying privilege, since Devī is always above and beyond that formidable learning, accessible to the devotee in verse 7, who sings, "may you stand forth before us!" In the "Flood of Beauty," the love and visualization occurring in "bhakti" (loving devotion) are retrieved, as verbal play replicates visual play and the unseen is made obliquely present in what is said indirectly, suggestively. One is left finally at the doorway of her chamber, and what one then does is apparently

a private matter, since the concluding verses (vv. 96–100) revert to a more stylized utterance of praise:

> 96. How many poets have not courted the wife of Vidhaṭṛ? Which poet does not become the Lord of the goddess Śrī, whatever his wealth? O foremost among good women, except for the great God, embracing Your breasts is not easily accomplished even by the *kuravaka* tree.

Bhakti, coming in its various forms, now has a tantric or post-tantric form: the deity is visible, material, beautiful, pleasurable, nearby, and able to be addressed directly, by anyone who is willing to be transformed by the experience. Tantra has been made into a useful tool by which loving contemplation of Devī is rendered possible, more potently, a second time.

Learning from the *Saundarya Laharī*

The *Saundarya Laharī* is a program for analysis and visualization, but it also implies certain themes that may be summarized as follows:

1. Devī is supreme, in effect, greater even than Śiva; one can worship and pray to her.
2. Devī is a subtle tantric reality: in name (as mantra), image (as *Śrī Cakra*), and form (as possessed of *cakras*).
3. Devī, made subtle, can be seen a second time again as a lovely, powerful woman.
4. Devī is an agent, not object; a mother who engenders a lovely world and living relationships.
5. Devī maximizes and satisfies desire for those devoted to her.
6. Devī can be encountered not only by the tantric connoisseur, but also by all those willing to become devotees and take the *Saundarya Laharī* to heart.

For the most part Devī is portrayed as possessing the attributes one might attribute to a supreme divine male figure—omnipotence, creative cosmic power and the power to save, serene and sovereign rule over the world in its every detail, the power to consume it and recreate it.[20] Devī is the consort of Śiva, but she is never merely his consort; she remains distinct from him and is portrayed in various relationships—with him, in him, enveloping him, making him potent and provoking him, calming him—almost all the attributes and powers conceded to him are seen to be hers. Devī is demythologized rather

thoroughly; much of the cultural expectation about goddesses and women is rendered rare and subtle by acts of tantric distillations. In form, image, and name she is reduced to her subtle essence, manifest for a time as pure female power, without any further accoutrements of female identity. But her female nature is not seen as a liability, for in the "Flood of Beauty" her specific feminine beauty is all the more obvious and potent, the very material and sensible presence of her divinity.[21] The *Saundarya Laharī* presents her body as beautiful and erotic, and such is the power by which she rules her consort and other divine beings. But even more than that, she is so complete a reality, so perfect a fullness of power, that one must revise one's understanding of what it means to relate to her: she is not merely a goddess before whom one does *pūjā*, but also the totality of which one is a part, and yet which, in the "Flood of Beauty," one views face to face.

If we extrapolate from the *Saundarya Laharī*—mindful of the further research required to establish firmly this reading of it—we can also say something about what it means to assert that a goddess is the supreme divine reality and still, always, a woman. The deconstruction and subtle reconceptualization of female divinity leave room for a new appreciation of the beautiful, powerful woman who generates the world around her, and to see this woman as an exemplar of the divine. Her beauty creates new situations, and those who contemplate the dramatic scenarios signaled by aspects of her beautiful form themselves become members of her retinue. Devī can be approached as divine only if appreciated as a woman. Obviously, the final and climactic portrayal of her pleasure with Śiva is intended to make sense only in terms of her female identity as against his male identity. The notion of power (*śakti*) is enfleshed and given back the world of matter generated from that power. Visual contemplation is thus passive on neither side: Devī as an object of observation is "seen" only in her dynamic role, transforming her context and exhibiting her power, while the viewer is repeatedly drawn into the drama apparent in each scene. The viewer becomes a player in the world that is inevitably built around her, the ascesis and retrieval of visions of Devī draw one into her pleasure. The more one understands the powers of the verses and appreciates aesthetically the interplay of elements within them, the more one is enabled to begin to appreciate their deeper riches and participate in the represented scenarios.

We do not have evidence that the *Saundarya Laharī* was in fact or theory taken to be socially liberative for women. But as a religious classic that remains popular and vital today, it can be read as suggestive of strategies by which to reuse and reconstruct contemporary

conceptualizations of gender in an affirmation of physicality, pleasure, and beauty as spiritually significant, and not just instrumental to the spiritual. We can find in the *Saundarya Laharī* implications for a constructive feminist thealogy (and anthropology) that seriously attends to this hymn, as the following theses suggest:

1. Gender stereotypes are accepted, as are cultural and religious traditions, but then deconstructed and reconstructed for liberative purposes, as penultimate and auxiliary to devotion's power and access.
2. Materiality, visibility, and pleasure are conceded, critiqued, and developed as female attributes.
3. Beauty is affirmed as available to the male gaze, but rendered dynamic in a richer mapping of the dramatic and social realm instigated by the visible beautiful.
4. At the same time, a safe subject-object split is ruled out, as the viewer is drawn into the web of relationships instigated by the beautiful woman who creates, shapes, vivifies those gazing upon her.
5. Sexual pleasure, rooted in gender differences, is affirmed, purified, intensified, and spiritualized (without losing its materiality).
6. The *Saundarya Laharī*'s gender strategy can thus be made to accommodate still wider uses by female and also male readers, and with male as well as female divine figures drawn into the contemplative gaze.

In proposing such (hypo)theses, I am aware of the way in which I have (over)simplified the rich and complex tradition that has grown up around the *Saundarya Laharī*. I welcome corrections and modifications of the points expressed here. I am also aware that my reading of the *Saundarya Laharī*—that of a male American scholar, not a Hindu, reading a medieval Sanskrit hymn written by males for males—cannot possibly be applied directly in a contemporary Indian feminist context. But I do hope and expect that further critique and reconstruction will build on the reading of the hymn offered here.

Notes

Another version of this essay, more ample and explicitly comparative, appears as chapter 3 of Clooney, 2005. All translations are my own, but I

have consulted and included in the bibliography several translations valuable also for their notes.

1. Of the various translations and editions, the most helpful with respect to insights into the commentaries is the edition/translation by S. Subramanya Sastri and T. R. Srinivasa Ayyangar. Throughout, I draw particularly on comments from two influential commentators, Lakṣmīdhara (sixteenth century), author of the eponymous *Lakṣmidharī*, and Kāmeśvara Sūri (henceforth Kāmeśvara), author of the *Aruṇāmodinī*, a commentary that acknowledges its debt to Lakṣmīdhara's work. For the general intellectual and religious context of the work, see Brooks, 1992, especially cc. 3 and 4, and also Tigunait, 1998, c. 2. See also my translation in Clooney, 2005, and notes on individual verses.
2. Throughout, I use "thealogy" to indicate the intellectual religious discourse articulated in the *Saundarya Laharī*, in order to highlight the goddess and feminist dimensions of what ordinarily could be termed a theological discourse.
3. On the five m's, see Tigunait, 1998: 45, and Brooks, 1992: 155.
4. As told in a mythic narrative known as the *Lalitopākhyāna*.
5. See also Caldwell's (2001) discussion of the *Saundarya Laharī* in light of parallel texts and devotions in Kerala.
6. According to Kāmeśvara Sūri, Śaṃkara is skilled in poetic composition, knowledgeable of, and skilled in sorting through the various treasured truths to be found in the texts of the tradition; he is perfect in that harmony of being, consciousness, and bliss by which the world is created, preserved, and destroyed, and likewise compassionate for people sunk in the vast and hard-to-cross ocean of *saṃsāra*; in order to carry out his purposes, he surveys all the tantras, determines what is useful with respect to the four human goals, he delves into *rasas* by enjoying her beauty and sweet speech, by using aesthetic suggestion as a means of communication, using poetry in a subtle variety of forms. As the fruit of this process, he composes this *Saundarya Laharī*. Out of his wisdom and compassion he chooses as his topic Devī, showing her bountiful and universally gracious disposition. By verses of praise Śaṃkara seeks to illumine her essence, which is hidden in scripture, how she is the means to all human goals, tender to those devoted to her, and ever in a dynamic relationship with the highest Śiva.
7. See *Aruṇāmodinī* on this notion of body: Śiva's ninefold manifestation/body as dependent on Devī.
8. On all three of the following points, see Brooks, 1992.
9. In the "Flood of Bliss," the naming is constrained: You are the great pride of the vanquisher of cities 7; Aruṇā 16; Hara's queen 19; Śivā 25; good woman 26; my lady 34; consort of Śiva 35.
10. Other names: Aruṇā 16, 93; pleasure 21; lady 34, 82; Eternal one 33; Samayā 39; Aparṇā 56; Caṇḍī 89.

11. For explanation and alternatives in the calculations here, see Sastri and Ayyangar, 1992.
12. See the *Aruṇāmodinī* on this notion of body: Śiva's ninefold manifestation/body as dependent on Devī.
13. The succession of the "Flood of Beauty" after the "Flood of Bliss" posed a problem for the tradition as well. The transition from 41 and the seeming climax of the ascent through the *cakras* and verse 42, meditation on her crown, is not explained in the *Saundarya Laharī*. The *Saubhagya* suggests that the "Flood of Beauty" is dedicated to the excellence of Devī's feet, under which everything in the "Flood of Bliss" has been subordinated. Kāmeśvara says that while everything has been made clear in the "Flood of Bliss," Śaṃkara offers this meditation to make knowledge of her easier. The *Diṇḍimabhāṣyam* adds that the meditation in the "Flood of Beauty" "is easy for those people of limited intelligence who seek pleasures and who do not want [the] understanding that meditation [is] on the unlimited light, which is easy only for those people who are looking [favorably] toward the path of liberation . . ." According to the *Padārthacandrikā*, in the "Flood of Bliss" her true, ineffable form is described, as in Vedānta, whereas in the "Flood of Beauty" her exoteric, visible form is described. None of these claims are supported or denied by the text, which offers no explanation of the move from "Bliss" to "Beauty."
14. Note how this redramatization differs from the discarded mythologization. Compare also Sarah Caldwell's comments on parallels in Kerala regarding visualization practice in Pintchman, 2001: 93–114.
15. Lakṣmīdhara and Kāmeśvara both appreciate another exaggeration: the bees are described as young elephants, as if they are similarly large and impulsive, or as if young elephants too might yearn for the honey of the sweet sounds. In this way they highlight for us the improbabilities of the verse, the unsettling of the given image, as the eyes and ears and mouth seem to trade roles—all of this governed by Devī's determination to enjoy Herself.
16. Lakṣmīdhara appeals to exaggeration to describe the play and quarrel of Śiva and Devī. He reads Śiva's mind, his jealousy that he has somehow been defeated by a mere tree. Devī is the most faithful of wives; by implication, it is due to his heightened love that Śiva himself is so very jealous.
17. See Ingalls, Masson, and Patwardhan, 1990: 335, on the standard comparison of the elephant's frontal globes and the woman's breasts.
18. Lakṣmīdhara highlights the heightened attention operative here; if her breasts are like elephants' lobes, it can only be the lobes of Vināyaka (Gaṇeśa) that are comparable. Moreover, Gaṇeśa is himself

making a comparison, which is then held up for the inspection and recognition of the reader. On Lakṣmīdhara's reading of verses 72–75, see Clooney, 2005: 174–176.

19. As we saw earlier, the entirety of the *Saundarya Laharī* ends (in verses 96–100) by a return to a petitionary and poetic, self-conscious, mode. Once language has broken down, in the inner precinct where she dwells, the poet concludes by backing off a bit, reflecting instead on the paucity of human words about Devī.
20. See Clooney, 2001: c. 2.
21. We thus have a purified, simplified notion of female being (perhaps analogous to that purified, simplified notion of maleness attributed to God in the Semitic traditions). It then offers a deconstruction of appearances that arduously travels from known, exoteric details to tantric equivalents powerful in part because (even if they are ultimately to be seen, heard, etc.) they cannot be imagined or visualized in any straightforward sense.

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CHAPTER 3

Mystery, Wonder, and Knowledge in the Triadic Figure of Mahāvidyā Chinnamastā: A Śākta Woman's Reading

Neela Bhattacharya Saxena

Introduction

About eighty years ago, in a small village called Mallikpur in Sylhet district, now in Bangladesh, a young girl, about five, sat watching an icon (*mūrti*) being made for the purposes of worship in her uncle's house. The girl watched with wonder and fascination as the gigantic icon took shape: the image of the goddess, in dark red color and with three blood streams emerging out of her decapitated head, would remain etched in her mind forever. The voice recalling the event comes clear and strong over the phone: it is the voice of my mother as I tell her I am working on an essay on Chinnamastā. She also tells me about this uncle, her father's brother, Bharat Chandra Bhattacharya, whose house was just across from her home beyond the pond on the southern end of the land; she remembers the garden of five trees in his house, called a "Panchabati," where her uncle was later cremated. She talks about their family's tantric guru, who probably officiated in the worship. She remembers one more icon, that of Dhumāvati, being made in her uncle's house, but Bharat Chandra died before he could sponsor the construction of icons of all ten Mahāvidyās, the supreme knowledge forms of the divine feminine in the Hindu tradition. Connecting a distant past with the present, my mother also tells

me in the same breath how her niece recently brought her the *prasād* of Chinnamastā from another such worship ritual (*pūjā*) in her house. *Prasād* is food offered in worship to, and sanctified by, a deity; it is consumable "grace."

Among the innumerable images of the Great Goddess that one encounters in Hindu traditions, one of the most intriguing and mysterious is that of Chinnamastā. As I visualize the icon to be able to write about her, I connect through my mother's voice and description with a living tradition of tantric goddesses. The Mahāvidyās are ten forms of the Great Goddess that are worshipped by Śāktas, that is, those who honor the Great Goddess as their primary deity. My essay here, in a volume about reclaiming and revisioning the Feminine in Hinduism, is one small exploration of the vast matrix of what I have described elsewhere as India's Gynocentric spirituality, the Śākta tradition that is centered on reverence for the divine feminine.[1]

My goal in this essay is to offer a Gynocentric interpretation of Chinnamastā from a devotional perspective. I assert in this essay that the icon of Chinnamastā has great spiritual significance to a Śakti-worshipping woman like me, starkly revealing the nonduality of life and death where women's bodies, sexuality, and nurturing potentials can be honored as mysterious sources of ultimate liberation.

For Śāktas, Ultimate Reality is the Great Goddess, who manifests herself as the active force in the universe. Myriad forms of that energy are simply manifestations of her immense diversity as she permeates everything, sentient and insentient, human and nonhuman. In the Śākta household where I grew up, we took for granted the supremacy of the Mother God. However, in my present Euro-American environment, the Hindu Mahādevī ("Great Goddess") is largely immaterial. As a transplanted woman whose transcultural experiences have both enriched and challenged my notions about the world, I am particularly aware of the difficulty of "translating" cultural icons, especially feminine ones, due to the deep-rooted assumptions that cloud our perceptions. This is where "dialexis," the ability to see through contextual communicative choices, is required. I am writing not an academic treatise but a personal theological reflection on this powerful figure, Chinnamastā, who comes to me as another form of the Mahādevī, the subterranean mooring of my psyche. I actively claim the Goddess as the supreme center of my consciousness.

There are two primary sets of sacred Hindu texts, the Purāṇas and the Tantras, where one encounters narratives and descriptions of religious practices pertaining to the Hindu Goddess. In my exploration of Chinnamastā, I look at both in order to construct my understanding

of her importance to Śākta woman devotees. Since Chinnamastā is known as a tantric deity, I must look first at the tantric path in general and the Śākta one in particular to situate my understanding of her in this larger religious context. In tantra, life, death, and sexuality remain intertwined when seen through a deconditioned mind, while ritual and intellectual efforts are made to transcend the dualities of purity and impurity, spirit and body, masculine and feminine.

The Śākta Tantric Path

Tantra is practiced and interpreted in various ways by different sects and is therefore difficult to define. However, David G. White's (2001: 9) working definition goes a long way toward making sense of the vast complex of tantric concepts and practices. He suggests that tantra is:

> [a] body of beliefs and practices which, working from the principle that the universe we experience is nothing other than the concrete manifestation of the divine energy of the godhead that creates and maintains that universe, seeks to ritually appropriate and channel that energy, within the human microcosm, in creative and emancipatory ways.

While there are myriad different practices prescribed for an individual practitioner on her or his particular path, they are designed to help one experientially realize a nondual view of the world that asserts that divine creative energy is accessible and useable to the human person, bridging the macrocosm and the microcosm.

I have located the Śākta tantric tradition in my work philosophically in what I call a Sāṁkhya-Yoga-Tantra continuum. In this continuum, the Indic tradition posits a primal duality of the feminine principle *prakṛti* (nature; materiality) and the masculine *puruṣa* (consciousness) in Sāṁkhya philosophy. Yoga grapples with the import of duality, while the tantric tradition resolves the duality of *prakṛti* and *puruṣa*, human and the divine, in an actualized nonduality where liberation or *mokṣa* entails a realization that the world is the body of the Goddess, and there is no ultimate distinction between body and spirit. Rita D. Sherma (1998: 107) succinctly elucidates:

> Tantrism transforms the Sāṃkhya dualism into a bipolar view of reality, which in its final resolution becomes a consummate nondualism, unlike the Sāṃkhya-based dualistic nondualism of Advaita. Tantra accepts the Sāṃkhya correlation of materiality with the feminine principle, but the latter is elevated in stature to accommodate tantric

> reverence for the Great Goddess as the genetrix of the universe. Despite the fact that she is the principle of change and materiality, which other [philosophical] schools devalue, she is perceived as the ultimate reality, transcendent as well as immanent, approachable and all-pervasive.

Tantric Śākta traditions emphasize the supremacy of Śakti and her eternal interplay with her consort Śiva, who is also understood in tantric theology as embodying the masculine principle. Śiva may be understood ultimately to be not different from Śakti, although the two appear to be different in their divine play. Even in Śaiva traditions, there is no access to Śiva without Śakti. Hence, for example, the renowned tenth-century Kashmir Śaiva tantric yogi Abhinavgupta was a Kālī worshipper and wrote the *Krama-stotra* in her praise; he states in his *Tantrāloka* that "the autonomous consciousness which is the Absolute is called Kālī" (cited in Sanderson, 2006: 64). According to the Tantras, the human woman is the natural seat of Śakti.

Tantric practices are as diverse as tantric paths, but it is fair to say that tantra tends to engage the body and its hidden revelatory capacity. Some forms of tantra, especially those that are called "left-handed," include rituals that are symbolically or actually sexual in nature. The esoteric symbols and rituals of tantra cannot be understood when seen via conditioned lenses that have rendered our view of sexuality either as sinful or as merely procreative. As Paul Muller-Ortega (1989: 14) explains, "it is necessary to undergo the process of experiential replication before the symbols speak to us completely."

My personal experience of Śākta tantra has been liberating in that its doctrine of the conscious presence of Śakti in embodied experience allows for the sacralization of physical life. There is no conflict between the sensorial and the spiritual, nor is there a struggle for primacy between the masculine and the feminine. In my view, tantra offers imagery that suggests the possibility of a joyful equality of the sexes by honoring both masculine and feminine alike as essential to spiritual understanding.

Mahāvidyā Chinnamastā: Iconography, Narratives, Texts, Yantra

Iconography—An Experiential Interpretation

As one of the ten Mahāvidyās, Chinnamastā is quite well known among tantrikas (practitioners of the path(s) of tantra yoga), but she is *not* well-known among lay worshippers of the Mahādevī. The Mahāvidyās are themselves forms of the Great Goddess, who destroys ignorance

and dual consciousness with her discriminating sword. According to one list, the ten are known as Kālī, Tārā, Tripur-sundarī (Ṣoḍaśi), Bhuvaneśvarī, Chinnamastā, Bhairavī, Dhūmāvatī, Bagalāmukhī, Mātaṅgī, and Kamalā (Kinsley, 1997: 14). Some worshippers view them all as various forms of the first Mahāvidyā, Kālī.

There are very few temples dedicated to Chinnamastā, but during Durgā *pūjā*, the most important goddess festival in the Indian state of West Bengal, she, along with the other Mahāvidyās, shows up on the panels surrounding the central image of the Mahādevī in her form as Durgā. During Kālī *pūjā*, all the Mahāvidyās are worshipped at midnight. While icons are often meant to aid a practitioner's system of spiritual practice, or *sādhana*, until he or she can meditate upon the formless, Chinnamastā is the only goddess whose icon is to be *avoided* by householders.[2]

The icon of Chinnamastā, which varies in its details, is one that some viewers find shocking, as it always depicts the goddess decapitating herself. For visual inspiration, I often turn to a picture that can be found on the cover of David Kinsley's 1997 book, *The Ten Mahāvidyās: Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine*. From the painting by Bhatuk Ramprasad on the dark cover of Kinsley's book, with her decapitated head on one of her four hands, Chinnamastā looks directly into the viewer's eyes as her body sits atop white Rati in *viparīta-rati* (sexual union in which the woman is on top) with her consort, blue Kāma. Two nude female figures, one dark and the other light, stand at her two sides. Three blood streams emanate from Chinnamastā's head: one stream she drinks herself, and the other two nourish her attendants. The jewels on the bodies of all the figures enhance their naked splendor, all encompassed within a halo of brilliant light (figure 3.1).

This is simply one image among many variations now easily available to curious eyes, thanks to the Internet. More traditional images would also have a burning pyre, or *citā*, upon which rests the embracing couple, sometimes depicted as Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa. In many pictures, including a contemporary lithograph to which Kinsley cites, a serpent adorns Chinnamastā's neck (145). Swamy Prajñānānda (1988: 48) cites her meditation mantra, which describes the serpent as her sacred thread. Snakes are common iconographic elements in tantric imagery because of their symbolic connection to the *kuṇḍalinī*, the powerful latent corporeal energy that is visualized as a coiled serpent asleep at the base of the spine in a subtle center of psycho-physical power called the *mūlādhāra cakra*. The snake around Chinnamastā's neck in this particular depiction is a clue to the icon's connection with

Figure 3.1 "Chinnamasta," from the cover of Kinsley's *Tantric Visions of the Divine Feminine*, reprinted with permission.

the yogic practice of awakening the *kuṇḍalinī*, which is itself a form of the Goddess.

Whatever the variation, it is the severed head and blood nourishment that give the icon its name. Elizabeth Benard (1994: 97–98) argues in her landmark book about Chinnamastā that "this frozen moment of temporarily decapitating her head indicates [Chinnamastā's] ability to transcend the relative dichotomy of life and death." The central

placement of the goddess's womb or vulva (*yoni*) in the heart of the image, along with the stark representation of sexuality as well as death, reinforces the importance of the feminine principle. Dualities such as death and life or spirit and matter merge in Chinnamastā in such a way that the vision of a pervasive divine unity becomes immanently real to the one who experiences the goddess. In this liberating image, many Śākta tantric ideas congregate: the nondual nature of reality, the intricate relationship between life and death, and the central role of the Mahādevī or Śakti in awakening the inner consciousness that shatters the illusions projected by a conditioned mind.

Some interpretations of the iconography suggest that the icon depicts, through the three female figures, the three energy channels (*nāḍīs*) of the subtle body—*iḍā*, *piṅgalā*, and *suṣumnā*—through which life energy (*prāna*) flows. The *kuṇḍalinī* moves upward when aroused by spiritual practice, ultimately penetrating the adept's consciousness and leading the adept to experience his or her true, nondual nature. As *kuṇḍalinī* awakens in the yogi or yoginī, it enters the central channel, the *suṣumnā*, and begins her path upward, through the seven *cakra*s, the centers of psycho-physical energy in the body, until she reaches the very top of the skull or the final *cakra*, the *saḥasrāra*, in supreme delight of union with Śiva (pure consciousness, the true Self) liberating the yogi/yoginī from all bondage. Some traditions postulate the existence of *cakra*s beyond the *sahasrāra* that denote further attainments of the yogi. If the *prāna* or life force is stuck between *iḍā* and *piṅgalā*, here represented by the two attendants, the self remains bound in duality. When the yogi/yoginī is able to channel the force into the central *nāḍī* that is *suṣumnā*, the arduous journey toward the experience of nonduality begins as the now awakened *kuṇḍalinī* power ascends toward the seventh *cakra* at the top of the head.

Narratives

Narratives about Chinnamastā add another enriching dimension to the icon and provide more clues to her meaning. Benard recounts the narrative of the origin of all the Mahāvidyās in the Śākta *Mahābhāgavata Purāṇa*. This narrative features Satī, here described as one of many incarnations of the Goddess, who takes form as part of the Goddess's cosmic play (*līlā*). In the story, Satī's father Dakṣa decides not to invite his daughter and her husband Śiva, whom Dakṣa dislikes, to a great fire sacrifice (*yajña*) that he is holding, but Satī insists on attending. When her husband Śiva tries to prevent her by

invoking his husbandly prerogative, she is enraged and begins to change into a fearsome form, forcing Śiva to close his eyes. When he opens his eyes, his beautiful wife has vanished; instead, he sees standing before him Kālī, naked and in her most formidable form, her roaring laughter filling the universe. Afraid, Śiva tries to flee, but in all ten directions stand ten fierce forms of the Goddess symbolizing her all-pervasive nature and the futility of trying to escape her. When he asks where his beloved Satī has gone, the Goddess replies that she is standing in front of him. To his edification, Śiva learns from a gentler form of the Mahādevī that these ten Mahāvidyās are her forms; she elucidates their names, denoting Chinnamastā in the east. The episode ends with all the forms merging into Kālī as she proceeds to destroy Dakṣa's pride (Benard 1994: 2–3). The narrative indicates the Goddess's all-pervading nature and independence.

Benard cites a story about Chinnamastā's origin. Here Pārvatī plays the role of Śiva's spouse in another cycle of creation, and she is accompanied by her two female attendants, Jayā and Vijayā. We hear that Pārvatī became sexually aroused while bathing in the Mandākini River when the two ask for food from her. There is no male presence here as the immediate cause for such arousal, but it seems spontaneous and without cause. The two attendants implore: "We are overpowered with hunger, O Mother of the Universe! Give us food so we may be satisfied, Oh Merciful One, Bestower of Boons and Fulfiller of Desires." She then smiles and severs her head with her nails, letting the three blood streams flow into the mouths of her attendants as well as her own (7). This narrative is one of the sources of the iconography of Chinnamastā. The usual rendering of Kālī as a bloodthirsty goddess who demands blood sacrifice is reconfigured in Chinnamastā's icon, where the Goddess has decapitated herself to nourish others with her blood. This image of the Goddess nourishing from her own body is analogous to the functions of the maternal, the female, and the Gynocentric.

Yantra

Along with iconography, narratives, and mantras, we must refer to Chinnamastā's yantra, the geometric form of the deity commonly used by householders for purposes of worship. The abstract iconography of Chinnamastā's yantra emphasizes the centrality of the iconic mark of the *yoni*, the downward triangle that functions as the symbol of the Great Feminine. Complete ritual worship specifies the making of a special yantra for Chinnamastā; the downward triangle resides in

the middle of it. Triangles are central to tantric imagination. Madhu Khanna (1979: 32), who calls yantras the tantric symbol of cosmic unity, writes: "The rhythm of creation is crystallized in the primal symbol of cosmic location, the triangle...It is the female emblem (*yoni-mandala*) of the sakti-principle."

One of the ways of making the yantra of Chinnamastā is "to draw three concentric circles in the middle of a triangle and a triangle in the center of these circles" (Benard 1994: 37). According to Khanna (1979: 58–59), Chinnamastā "symbolizes the end of existence or the consummation of the ever-burning, ever-devouring life-cycle that precedes and influences resurrection." Thus, the inverted triangle that is the iconographic *yoni* of the Great Goddess is the matrix in which the universe is birthed, nourished, dissolved, and recreated. It is not a coincidence that some of Chinnamastā's 108 names include Yonimudrā and "Yonigamyā ("accessible through the yoni") (Benard 1994: 59).

Texts and Theology

In the tradition of dialogue between Śiva and the Goddess that is common in tantric texts, such as the *Śākta-pramoda* and *Mahānirvāṇa Tantra*, Śiva relates spiritual truths to the Goddess. Tantric texts known as Nigamas have the Goddess as the speaker and Śiva as the listener. Benard (1994: 121) refers to the "Chinnamastātantra" section of the *Śākta-pramoda* and translates the thousand names of the goddess recited therein. Śiva says to the Devī: "Listen, Devī, I shall tell you about Chinna, so pleasing to the mind" (qtd. in ibid.), and before the recitation of Chinnamastā's names, Śiva explains that one is to worship her for the accomplishment of the four goals of life in Hindu axiology: *dharma* (virtuous action), *artha* (prosperity and power), *kāma* (sensory and aesthetic pleasure), and *mokṣa* (spiritual liberation). However, she herself is Dharmakarmavirahitā, her 552nd name; that is, she is beyond *dharma* and *karma*. The same text tells us that her first name is Pracandcaṇḍikā, "the powerfully fierce one," and the last name is Sarvānanda-prādayinī, "prime giver of all Ānanda or bliss."

To me, the names respectively signify that Chinnamastā is fierce when the practitioner first faces her, but she becomes gentle as the practitioner progresses in his or her meditation on the deity. A simple practice of acquainting oneself with the thousand names of Chinnamastā, which is her theology, may give one an idea of how she is both a particular and a universal deity within the Śākta universe.

For a Śākta like me, reading them during the festival time of the Devī, Durgā *pūjā*, is profoundly significant. She is both The One Who Remains in Thought (Citisansthā) and The One Who Resides in the Womb/Vulva (Bhagasthā); she is both the form of desire (Kāmarupā) and spiritual emancipation (Kaivalyā). In her thousand names, paradox abounds, and all the deities dwell. She gives the joy of sight and she is full of fragrance (cited in ibid., 122–124). In the tantric tradition one must become the deity in order to worship her. My long meditations make Chinna pleasing to my mind; I perceive the identification; I sense her in my body.

So, how does one look at an icon of a goddess like Chinnamastā, who is frightening and even repellent to some, and speak about it? Seeing the beauty in an otherwise horrific image is central to Śākta imagination. To me, the wonder or *vismaya* awakened by meditation on the figure opens the self to a deep wisdom inherent in the recesses of the body. I would argue that we can appreciate fully the figure of Chinnamastā only when we make an effort to suspend our fear and loathing of death, as well as our prurient fascination with sexuality. Meditation upon the decapitated figure of Chinnamastā or her yantra, coupled with yogic practices, has inaugurated for me an awareness of the need to expand the limited conceptual universe that hinders direct experience of reality.

Toward a Gynocentric Understanding: Acknowledging the Female Experience

To me Chinnamastā exists in the imagination of the human and is therefore both real and unreal at the same time, an aspect of Kālī whom I have described as "pregnant nothingness" (Saxena 2004: 2). I understand her to be simultaneously both plenum and void; she is existentially real as the fact of life and death, yet she is no-thing. She is not, in my view, a transcendental deity sitting in a heaven beyond; she is instead a symbol for a spiritual state that can be realized experientially within one's own innermost being. While texts and their interpretations vary, usually those who worship Chinnamastā appear to have been men, and those who have interpreted her have been mostly men as well. How does a woman find herself in this picture then? I would suggest that the icon should have a different import for women when compared to men.

Chinnamastā's image certainly can induce a Not-Self experience for a female religious practitioner like myself. One witnesses the *līlā* or play of the Goddess, internalizes the moment, and continues to

participate in the world in a supreme tantric realization that there is nothing to transcend in this phenomenal world of Mahādevī's creative *māyā*. Transcendence in this sense means deep realization that stops me from getting too attached to mere pieces of my existence. I at once become an actor and a witness to that great play where the triadic representation of sexuality as the Mahāyoni in the yantra (symbolic of the Cosmic Womb/vulva of the Goddess) points toward a Divine Sexuality that is neither gratificatory/consuming nor transcendentalizing, but simply a form of play, *līlā*. Beholding the icon, the self in recognition of what it is *not*, flows toward the *one* who is all.

I now look at the late eighteenth-century picture of Chinnamastā by Molaram (see Kinsley 1997: 158), which is a more composite and quite different image than many others, with Chinnamastā's body sitting in intercourse with a strikingly white Śiva on a burning pyre. The pair is surrounded by the *citā*, the burning funeral pyre, and the blood flow from Chinnamastā's cut-off head creates the cycle of life and death. Śiva is absolute quiescence, that is, the pure, nondual consciousness (*cit*) that resides deep within the body and can only be accessed by the tantric yoga that the Goddess is performing. "*Citā*" (the funeral pyre) is connected to "*cit*" or consciousness, which is aroused as we awaken from sleep. All the faces in this icon look upward. Mahādevī gazes upon the universe as she creates by engaging in sexual unity with Śiva, or deep consciousness. In figure 3.1, she faces the devotee directly. Benard (1994: 119) is correct when she says, "Chinnamastā reveals the tantric technique of liberation without words; her iconography is her code." But her comment that "in pictorial representations, Chinnamastā does not look directly at her devotees" is based on other images (she might not have had access to this picture at the time), and Benard consequently concludes, "By looking at herself, she directs her devotees to look within themselves" (101). The icon on Kinsley's book appears to look at and speak to me directly; instead of directing the practitioner inward, the eye contact transforms her into the goddess and simultaneously allows for *darśan* (viewing a deity with a sense of connection and devotion).

The Chinnamastā icon can be perceived as a visual yantra; I would suggest that any practitioner who is ready for the awe-inspiring image is meant to visualize, internalize, and recite the icon, yantra, and mantra until in a shaft of light s/he is freed from all bondage. But as a woman, I read it also as a luminous geometry of the universe that is meant to be experienced within the female body. Such symbolic representations point toward an experience unutterable in ordinary parlance. The blood streams are pouring in a focused way out of three

nāḍiś, which transmit energy; the *suṣumnā* carries the force of the *kuṇḍalinī* itself. That which appears as blood iconographically may also be understood as representative of the life-giving capacity of the female body.

A Gynocentric reading of the image can also point to the female experience of sexuality, diverse though it is. The image may be indicating not only sensual pleasure, but also a deeply inward experience; it is the flow of desire to reach out to the other, mutually encompassing each other into the depths of being. This could be experienced by a woman physically as she freely lets the flow of bodily nourishment, both blood in the womb and milk from the breast to nurture another, her child. David Kinsley (1997: 160–161) offers us an important insight in this regard:

> If menstrual blood is the equivalent of male semen for a woman, then the retention of menstrual blood might also result in spiritual awakening and power. When a woman becomes pregnant, menstrual blood ceases to flow, and the result is dramatically evident: a new being is formed inside her. Another dramatic result of retained blood and pregnancy is the creation of milk. It is as if the blood has been transformed into milk. Might not Chinnamastā's image represent the generation of spiritual power in a female, the rising of the *kuṇḍalinī*, by means of the retention of her sexual fluids and the transformation of them into nourishing fluid?

The flow of breast milk as nourishment can be interpreted as analogous to the flow of compassion, in both Buddhist and Hindu renderings, toward the other. The severed head, thereby, can be seen as deemphasizing the self-involved practices of reaching the ultimate freedom solely for oneself. Rather, the emphasis of Chinnamastā's image here is on the Goddess's immanence and, in this particular form, on her role as the preserver and nourisher of all life, even as it acknowledges her death-wielding role. The significance of the head sacrifice as a symbolic "annihilation of the ego" is an interpretation that would be recognizable to many Hindu Śākta practitioners; but all this does not explain why Chinnamastā is drinking her own blood.

Since identity with the deity is one of the important forms of *sādhanā* in tantric practice, then from the practitioner's point of view (upon internally merging with the image) there is the clear sense that everything that one needs in terms of "gnostic nourishment" lies within oneself and, properly evoked, can nourish others too. But, the tantric perspective here seems to be that the nature of nourishment and, by corollary that of gnosis (*vidyā*), is feminine, regardless of whether

it is undertaken by a male or female practitioner. And, whether the *sādhikā* experiences herself as Devī or as *dākinī* (an enlightened attendant of the Goddess), she consumes that knowledge with an organicity that implies a deep intimacy, dissolving the subconscious barriers between the human practitioner and the Divine.

As Mahāmayā, the Mahādevī is also the one who veils, through *māyā*, the underlying nonduality of life. The two figures, Dākinī and Varṇinī, are embodied female power in their autonomous existence as extensions of this Mahāvidyā herself; they are also her disciples. The two attendants are usually depicted as pubescent females, leading me to think that the scene is depicting a female initiation: these young attendants are initiated into the mystery of the Goddess and adult womanhood through their ingestion of her blood, the source of life and gnosis. The hunger the two women attendants speak of in the narrative recounted earlier may be understood not as ordinary hunger, but as spiritual hunger, which can only be satisfied by drinking the essence of the Mahādevī herself. In also drinking her own blood, the Goddess points to nonduality between her, her two attendants, and the human yoginī meditating upon the icon and internalizing, within her being, the Goddess, as well as to the Goddess's eternally rejuvenating power inextricably linked with overcoming death.

I see in Chinnamastā a Triadic Mother figure that nurtures and enfolds one within herself; her icon points to a Divine Self reaching out to nurture the human self and returning to her fullness, or *pūrṇam*. The flow of blood out of a severed head opens into the infinite toward all Being waiting for spiritual nourishment. For the worshipper, the icon is not, ultimately, gruesome or shocking; rather, it is a visual representation of the divine feminine as giver and taker of all life and the source of all spiritual wisdom.

Concluding Reflection

In writing a constructive essay such as this one, I attempt to reclaim and reinterpret Chinnamastā from a female devotee's perspective. I have found the most inspirational and potentially liberating—in the worldly, feminist sense of the word—imagery of male-female relationships in tantra, a conceptual world that has provided to me an understanding of the relationship between the masculine and feminine that could potentially support gender-egalitarian ideals. I find in Chinnamastā a figure that honors in particular women's bodily and spiritual capacities.

When I recently visited the Kāmākhyā temple in Northeast India, I walked down the deep dark cave of the Chinnamastā shrine, which has no icon but two little clay snakes. I could sense the elemental dance of all creation that can be accessed within our own bodies. The shrine was completely deserted when I walked down the steep stairs into the darkened chamber. I had to hold the railing as I trembled entering the womb shrine. There is no icon in the dark chamber, only a flat, uneven, and moist rock, hardly visible. The two little snakes—I wondered if they were made of rock or clay—facing each other in the dim light of an earthen lamp against the wall appeared amazingly alive, again reminding me of the coiled serpent power of the *kuṇḍalinī* lying dormant within the ephemeral human body. They say if awakened consciously or unconsciously, the *kuṇḍalinī* could plunge one into the depths of the maddening universe of the Great Goddess with tremendous intensity. The dark shrine of Chinnamastā within the Kāmākhyā temple complex, one of those places where the ancient matricentered paths still survive, reminds me of our wholeness and unity with the Great Goddess in all her complexity and beauty.

Notes

I am deeply indebted to Tracy Pintchman and Rita D. Sherma for their extensive help in editing this essay.

1. I have explored the idea of Gynocentric spirituality in *In the Beginning IS Desire* (2004). I use the capital "G" in "Gynocentric" deliberately to denote the supremacy of the Great Goddess in the Śākta tradition.
2. Elizabeth Benard (1994: 28) explains: "In many Hindu Tantric texts, such as the Great Liberation, the yogis are the ones who meditate on the deity without form, while the householders meditate on the deity with form; however Chinnamastā's form is such an awesome vision that only yogis can meditate on her with form."

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PART II

Reclaiming Alternative Modalities of Feminine Power

PART II

CHAPTER 4

Sītā Rasoīs and *Śākta Pīṭhas*: A Feminine Reclamation of Mythic and Epic Proportions

Phyllis K. Herman

The fundamental questions underlying the materials I take up in this chapter are (1) how "the feminine" and "feminism" can be characterized for and by Hindu women today, (2) whether or not there is a potentially positive relation between those two terms. In Hinduism, a traditional paradigm for the former is that of the *pativratā*, the faithful wife who honors her vows of marriage. Two of the most compelling and persistent examples of the *pativratā* are Sītā and Satī, epic heroines and goddesses who continue to be widely promulgated as models for how the Hindu women of India should behave. I would like to consider particular aspects of these *pativratā*s dialexically, that is, as a style of feminine being and action, which could enhance an indigenously defined feminism in India. For better or worse, Rāma and Śiva have been activated and characterized in the service of Indian nationalism and Hindu masculinity, and Kālī and Durgā have been employed as models of femininity in the service of the Hindu state. Here I would like to address how Sītā or Satī can and even should be reclaimed as models of empowerment for modern Hindu women.

I will pursue this perhaps unsettling idea that the model of the faithful wife could constitute a feminist paradigm by outlining the power inherent in the ideal of the *pativratā* and by looking at the two quintessential models (Satī and Sītā) and their shrines in Ayodhyā and Citrakūt. I will address how in particular Sītā in her kitchen shrines provides both a locus for a Hindu feminism and a provocative starting

point for a dialogue between Western feminists and Hindu women. The construction of the feminine in Hindu iconography, cultural narratives, and sacred geography gives Hindu feminism its own voice. As Rita Sherma notes in her introduction to this volume, "Hindu perceptions of the divine feminine inform and shape Hindu expressions of female agency and authority that are beginning to be articulated in a different key from Western feminist ideals" (xi).

In India, an intrinsically empowering "thealogy" is already in place—literally. The whole of the Indian subcontinent can be seen, I would argue, as the body of a goddess/*pativratā*: Sītā reenters the earth at the end of the Rāmāyaṇa, Satī's body parts are scattered all over India, such that their diffused bodies both "fertilize" the subcontinent and unite it as a whole. Their shrines are local manifestations that connect and are connected to the larger "faithscape" of the subcontinent, nourishing the nation as a whole while expressing the ritual power of individual women. These shrines that commemorate Sītā and Satī as ideal wives also support the traditional connections between the good Hindu wife and the well-being of all India: the *pativratā* is responsible for the care and feeding of her immediate family and, by extension, the care and feeding of the nation is within her purview as well.

In what follows, I will first summarize the essential connections among Sītā, Satī, and the *pativratā*. I will explore the connections between two different manifestations of goddess-geography in India: the "Sita's Kitchen" shrines (*Sītā Rasoīs*), which celebrate Sītā as cook, and the "Seats/Places of Goddess Power" shrines (*Śākta Pīṭhas*), which mark the places where parts of Satī's dead body fell to earth. I will contemplate the conflation of these shrines in Ayodhyā and Citrakūt, linking the ascendancy of Sītā, the cook in her kitchen, over Satī, the wife who is literally "the cooked," to the lives of contemporary Hindu women. In so doing, I hope to delineate resources for Hindu feminism that are already implicitly and explicitly in place.

Defining the *Pativratā*

The ongoing power of both Sītā and Satī is built upon their standing as the ideal Hindu wife, the *pativratā*, literally, "one who is true to the vow to her husband." After marriage, which transforms the powerless girl into a wife, the *pativratā* has three primary duties, each involving, literally or figuratively, the application of heat or the use of fire. These duties are turning raw foodstuffs into cooked dishes,

creating children from the raw energy of sex, and remaining faithful to her husband especially by reserving her passion for him alone. In the strictest interpretation of these duties, the wife's life is a continual sealing of the fleshly bond between herself and her husband, as she moves from the ritual fire of marriage through the rituals of the kitchen, childbirth, and, in a few cases, the funeral pyre.[1] Thus, each and every day of her married life, a good Hindu woman—like the Brahmin priest—is dealing with "the most highly charged substances and elements in Indian theology" (Fruzzetti, 1982: 69), namely, fire, food, and flesh.

A model for the powers the *pativratā* attains through performance of her duties is found, as Mary McGee (1987: 337) has noted, in the *tapasvin*, literally, "one possessed of and characterized by heat" (Kaelber, 1989: 15) or "one who heats himself up" (Malamoud, 1996: 47), the Hindu ascetic who is usually, but not necessarily, male. The Sanskrit and Hindi linguistic roots *tap* (to heat) and *pac* (to cook), with their very long and complex ritual and devotional (bhakti) associations, suggest that the *tapasvin* and the *pativratā* attain perfection through the management of the transformative powers of inner and outer heat. The Sanskrit verb root *tap* relates to the inner heat brought about by austerities but also to the productive power of sexual heat and the generative heat of the sun on the soil. *Tapas* is always seen as a creative process; for example, the *Aitareya Brāhmaṇa* (5.32) tells how the world comes into being through *tapas*, and the *Mahābhārata* tells of *tapas*-laden ascetics able to generate rain and fertility (Kaelber, 1989: 18–19).

The root *pac* has a similar complex of meanings. It relates to the act of cooking itself, and in the history of Hinduism, there is a definite preference for food that is *pakkā* (cooked in ghee) over food that is *kaccā*. The difference between *pakkā* and *kaccā* is not Claude Levi-Strauss's famed distinction between the raw and the cooked, but rather that *pakkā* foods are more elaborately prepared than that which is *kaccā:* "what is *pakkā* is therefore more precious, or 'better' than that [which] is *kaccā*" (Malamoud, 1996: 52). The root *pac* is also used outside of the literal kitchen, in relation to the gestation of the human embryo or the development of seeds into food. In this context, *pac* can be translated as "to ripen" or "to mature." Thus, just as the heat of the hearth or oven (*cūlhā*) cooks food, the heat of the mother's body causes her fetus to mature and the heat from the sun causes seeds planted in the earth to grow and ripen (see Herman, 1998: 164).

In sum, Hindu women, both epic and ordinary, achieve goodness through their interactions with fire: Sītā and Satī define themselves as good wives *par excellence* by offering themselves to the flames; real women establish themselves as good wives (*pativratā*) by cooking over the kitchen fire. This interaction has been enacted daily across India for centuries in the kitchen area (*rasoī*) of the home, where, as many scholars have noted, the Hindu wife presides over the fire just as the Hindu priest presides over the sacred fire in the temple space. This fundamental definition of the *pativratā* as one who interacts productively with heat is instanced not only by the stories of Sītā and Satī but also by the local hierophanies of their powers found across India—the *Sītā Rasoī*s and the *Śākta Pīṭha*s commemorating Satī.

Sītā's Kitchen, Satī's Body

In the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa* and in other iterations of the Rāma narratives, Sītā submits to a trial by fire (*agniparīkṣā*) in order to prove her continued purity, and thus her claim on her status as *pativratā*. She emerges alive, revitalized, and even exceedingly fruitful: after walking through the ritual fire, and after returning with Rāma to Ayodhyā, Sītā begins to cook up, as it were, twin sons for Rāma, fulfilling one of the basic duties of the *pativratā*. Before Lava and Kuṣa are born, however, Sītā is sent, at Rāma's behest, into exile in the forest. Feeling unable to live again with Rāma, Sītā turns her final act into that of a *pativratā*. After her sons are reunited with Rāma, she reenters the earth from which she was born, ensuring the fertility and abundance of food that are essential to creation and maintenance of Rāma's ideal rule (*Rāmarjya*).

Missing from the Rāma narrative's explicit celebration of Sītā's fertility in life and Sītā's service to her husband after death—two of the three essential attributes of the *pativratā*—is any explicit reference to Sītā in the kitchen. The modern and popular manifestations of Sītā as the presiding goddess of the kitchen in the many *Sītā Rasoī*s found in contemporary India (Herman, 2000) consolidate Sītā's claim on the title *pativratā*; these shrines also literalize and localize her abstract roles as the cook (her fertility, both as mother and in the earth) and the cooked (in the earth and during her trial by fire) of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, making Sītā into a *pativratā* more suited for everyday life.

In 1997 and again in 2000, I set out to visit most of the sites in India where a *Sītā Rasoī* has been recorded in the pilgrimage literature, compelled by the fact that the great heroine and paradigmatic *pativratā* of the epic never cooked yet has many shrines dedicated to

her culinary expertise. My list of the locations of her kitchen shrines expanded as I traveled, however, as those I met described to me the *Sītā Rasoī* in their home villages. There were reports of them all over the subcontinent, even in places not generally associated with the Rāma narratives. Those *Sītā Rasoī*s that I was able to visit usually contained some literal manifestation of the Indian kitchen—a *cūlhā*, a rolling pin, a rolling board, a seat.[2] In each case, I was struck by just how much these extremely evocative domestic shrines portray Sītā as both a cook and a constant manifestation of the Goddess (Devī) and goddess power, universal energy (Śakti). In defiance of the epic and other narratives, including the *Rāmcaritamānas*, Sītā is perceived as an extremely dedicated cook. The concrete relationship between Sītā and cooking, along with the interpretation of the epic *pativratā* as a presiding goddess of place, turned out to be very similar to another unifying aspect of Indian sacred geography, namely, the *Śākta Pīṭha*s of Satī.

D. C. Sircar (1973) has engaged in an exercise similar to my earlier work on Sītā wherein I tracked the Vedic and epic sources for Sītā and her modern kitchen shrines, tracing the mythological history of Satī and her *Śākta Pīṭha*s.[3] According to Sircar, the early sources for this legend make no mention of Satī herself, but the story gradually evolved until the fifth century, when the great poet and dramatist Kālidāsa has Satī, now identified as the daughter of Dakṣa and the wife of Śiva, choose to commit suicide to rebuke Dakṣa for not inviting her husband to the great celebration he is hosting, which centers on a ritual fire (5). Satī dies by fire in defense of her husband's honor, just as Sītā endured the trial by fire in the Vālmīki *Rāmāyaṇa*. Both go into a ritual fire, but only one comes out in her current incarnation to continue her marriage. It is of note that given the associations between the *pativratā* and *tapas* that I developed earlier, in one iteration (the *Kālikā Purāṇa*), Satī is described not as entering the ritual fire, but as spontaneously combusting, using her own ascetic heat or *tapas*.

More important, the Purāṇas added to Kālidāsa's tale of the dismemberment and dispersal of Satī's body over the subcontinent and connect what were probably already extant expressions of feminine geographical hierophany to Satī. In some Purāṇas, her body drops apart as Śiva proceeds with her corpse over his shoulder or clasped in his arms; in other versions, Viṣṇu hastens the process, gradually cutting Satī's body up to disperse it. As it turns out, the influence of the lovely and devoted Satī, the first incarnation of Śiva's consort, has brought the ascetic Śiva closer to this world and to the life of the

householder. In her next incarnation, as Pārvatī, having gone through the fire, the goddess is able to fully domesticate Śiva, bearing his children and completing the divine pairing of male and female power. Satī had marked herself as the *pativratā extraordinare* by choosing to end her life in service of her husband's honor, but the truly productive marital relationship is the one she builds with Śiva in her next incarnation, as Pārvatī.

In any case, the modern *Śākta Pīṭhas* mark where the parts of the dismembered *pativratā*, Satī, fell and seeded the earth of India with a series of sacred spaces (Kinsley 1986: 187). The number of *Śākta Pīṭhas* enumerated in the texts varies widely, ranging from under a dozen to over a hundred, and the lists usually note the presiding feminine deities (*śāktas*) of each site. Like the *Sītā Rasoīs*, these domestic shrines reflect locative devotion, and their existence is both prompted by and yet not always documented in the texts. I refer to the *Śākta Pīṭhas* as domestic not because they are kitchen shrines but because they have, like the *Sītā Rasoīs*, a certain concrete "this-worldliness" of place and geography as feminine:

> The word "*Pīṭha*"...suggests to us that the goddess takes a seat, in this world—a firm seat, a bench...and the prayers and concerns that one might bring to the goddess who takes a seat...are the prayers and concerns having to do with birth and death, disease and health, food and water, fertility and longevity. (Eck 1982; cited in Brown, 1998: 239)

Thus, like the *Sītā Rasoīs*, the *Śākta Pīṭhas* make the traditional connection between the *pativratā*—whether it is Satī or Sītā or the modern wife—and divine feminine, who through her interactions with fire and heat creates, transforms, and nurtures in the service of her family.

Intersecting Feminine Sacred Space: Ayodhyā and Citrakūt

Today, many shrines are dedicated to Sītā's culinary expertise: from Ayodhyā to Nasik, they express a topography of the *Rāmāyaṇa* and testify to Sītā's culinary expertise. These shrines make concrete a relationship between Sītā and cooking that has become a popular interpretation of her as a presiding goddess of place. As the goddess in the kitchen, Sītā is manifest as a source of providence and nurture. It is as if Sītā, who at the end of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is swallowed up by and

reunited with the earth, emerges to preside over the *cūlhā*. Within the *Sītā Rasoī* shrines, the land of India as the source of sustenance and the kitchen as a sacred space conflate.

The mythic history of the *Pīṭha* shrines is an interesting variation on the impulse underpinning the *Sītā Rasoī*s. Like Sītā, Satī chooses to end her life, throwing herself in the fire rather than, as Sītā did, into a cleft in the earth. Satī's body is then taken up and scattered by Śiva, who thus unwittingly spreads her power across and into the landscape of India. Today, each of the various shrines to her scattered parts is described as having its own presiding goddess—the dismembered goddess creates a series of sacred spaces that, when taken together, encompasses the whole of the subcontinent.

These two textual and physical genres of feminine sacred space explicitly intersect in Ayodhyā and Citrakūt, important locales of the Rāma narratives. Medieval scriptures describe both *Sītā Rasoī*s and *Śākta Pīṭha*s as being present, yet only the *Sītā Rasoī*s exist there today; the *Śākta Pīṭha*s listed in texts are not to be found. For example, three separate lists of *piṭha* shrines in Puranic and medieval texts give Ayodhyā, the city of *Rāmarajya*, as the site of a *Śākta Pīṭha* and name as the presiding goddess not Sītā but rather Annapūrṇa, literally, "she who is filled with food."[4] The *Matsya Purāṇa* cites Sītā herself as a presiding Śākta and states that her *Pīṭhasthāna* is to be found at Citrakūt, the region of the famous forest idyll of the *Rāmāyaṇa*. Nonetheless, *Śākta Pīṭha*s make no appearance in either the *Ayodhyā Māhātmya* or the *Citrakūt Māhātmya*, two late medieval texts that are still used to direct the pilgrim to important holy stations.

The *Sītā Rasoī*s that exist in their respective landscapes are quite clearly located and described, however. Just as the *Ayodhyā Māhātmya* states, a *Sītā Rasoī* exists on the Rāmkot in modern Ayodhyā (as I saw it in 1997; see Herman, 1998). This beautiful shrine in the basement of the Birthplace of Rāma Complex (*janmasthāna*) is equipped with an image of Sītā, a *cūlhā*, a rolling pin, a rolling board, and a seat. The *paṇḍit*s who accompanied me into the shrine told me that the *rasoī* shrine had been a very popular site of pilgrimage before the demolition of the adjacent Babri Mosque; the shrine is currently unused, a victim of the security measures in place since the 1992 riots. In the *Citrakūt Māhātmya*, the devotee is told to worship on the second day of pilgrimage at the great Hanuman shrine on a hill and then continue to the highest point pilgrims are allowed to go in all of Citrakūt, to an elaborate *Sītā Rasoī* complex at the summit. This hilltop compound (as I saw it in 2000) is made up of several buildings, all dedicated to Sītā: the main one has Hindi inscriptions clearly identifying it as the

Kitchen of Sītā Shrine. This structure contains a *cūlhā*, a rolling pin, and a sitting place where Sītā is said to have prepared food and cooked it. The hill itself is known by various names, including Hanumān Hill, but the peak (and sometimes, the entire hill) is known in and around Citrakūt as *Sītā Rasoī.*

Actually, two *Sītā Rasoī* sites are to be found in the region of Citrakūt—the second, not mentioned in the *Māhātmya*, is currently in ruins but is being rebuilt. The remnants of this *Sītā Rasoī* are located in a cave on top of another hill, above the modern village of Lalapur. The *paṇḍits* I spoke with said that Sītā was there either during her first exile, when she cooked for Rāma and Lakshmana, or during her second exile, when she cooked for the poet Vālmīki and for her sons, Lava and Kuṣa. The remains of a Vālmīki Āśram are also visible, just above the signs marking the *Sītā Rasoī.*

Ayodhyā, the greatest of cities, and Citrakūt, the forest idyll nonpareil, are obviously connected to each other by way of the Rāma narrative. However, I suggest that the modern presence of *Sītā Rasoī*s in both areas today connects them to the promotion of abundant food, especially as it relates to the formation and maintenance of that paradigm of Rāma's perfect rule wherein all are fed and satisfied. In point of fact, the *Ayodhyā Māhātmya* explicitly connects Annapūrna and Sītā. In the description of the Sītā's Kitchen Complex (*Sītāpakisthana*), the goddess Pārvatī asks her husband, Śiva, to tell her about the great kitchen of Sītā. Śiva says that the kitchen of Sītā is always filled and pilgrimage to it can be done at all times, adding that the kitchen is so great that it destroys evil and that just seeing it will fill the pilgrim's own house with food (*annapūrṇā virājate*). The *Ayodhyā Māhātmya* (*AM.* 24.1–8) thus locates power and presence of Sītā in a divine kitchen shrine that is always full of food and has the power to bestow prosperity and food. In Ayodhyā and in Citrakūt, a "construction" of the Great Goddess resides in the *Sītā Rasoī*s and in the idea of the *Śākta Pīṭha*s—the universal and particular notion of the Goddess in these localities is Sītā, seated in her kitchen shrine, actively preparing and cooking food for the satisfaction of one and all. The agency that once guaranteed a *Rāmarājya* "filled with bountiful food" can still be available to a modern pilgrim or devotee. But what does this all matter, this subsuming of the *Śākta Pīṭha*s of Ayodhyā and Citrakūt by the *Sītā Rasoī*s, this enshrining of Sītā in the kitchen where, indeed, Satī should be sitting?

I would argue that the definition of the *pativratā* chosen by modern Hindus is literalized by this coincidence of time, place, and texts. The triumph of Sītā in the kitchen over the shrines dedicated to the

broken body of Satī is a move that expresses an historical empowerment of Hindu women. Let me reiterate the myths and their implications. The winning paradigm does not privilege the shrines that grew out of the story of Satī, of a divine husband carrying the body of his dead wife, lonely, mad, so grief-stricken that the continued existence of the universe is threatened, almost fatally disconnected from family and the good of the larger community. Instead, it privileges the woman at the hearth, tending to the feeding and nurture of her family and, by extension, the kingdom as a whole. Quite literally, the *Sītā Rasoīs* in Ayodhyā and Citrakūt are a triumph of hearth and home over the *Śākta Pīṭhas*, sprouted from the disconnection and fragmentation of the goddess/*pativratā*'s body. In other words, where Sītā and Satī are pitted directly against one another, Hindus prefer the active, living kitchen goddess, the one who holds the family together, to the goddess without a family.

Cooking as Ritual

In 2003 and 2004, I interviewed a range of housewives in India belonging to different castes, classes, and incomes about various aspects of cooking and food preparation in their homes. I spoke with women in large urban centers such as Delhi and Ahmedabad and in the rural areas of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Rajasthan. Most of the women acknowledged their role as ritual experts in the kitchen—including women who worked outside the home. Only women involved in a dialogue with Western feminism regarded the notion that the kitchen was a locus of power with suspicion, and many of these women did not cook. Among the housewives I surveyed, all those engaged in food preparation agreed that cooking was intimately connected to their role in securing the continuance and well-being of their families.

The value that Hindu women place on cooking echoes sentiments in other traditions. Various scholars have noted that women, both in Eastern and in Western religious traditions,[5] are considered ritualists primarily when it comes to food and food preparation. Speaking of Judaism, Susan Sered (1992: 9) notes that "the rituals of food preparation imbue with holiness the everyday domestic work [of women]." Dealing with Medieval Christian women, Caroline Walker Bynum (1987: 159) writes that "food is important to women religiously because it is important socially . . . food is particularly a woman-controlled resource." In modern India, Sītā *in her kitchen shrines* is the quintessentially feminine paradigm and her place and occupation empowers women: she is a goddess who sanctifies and glorifies what

Western-influenced feminists have come to see as the most menial of tasks, cooking. The modern *Sītā Rasoī* shrines offer a point of insight into the construction of the powerful sacred and ritual nature of actions involved in women's daily participation in food preparation.

The women I interviewed uniformly stressed the role of the use of fire, irrespective of whether the cooking was done on a gas stove or on the old-fashioned *cūlhā* itself. The standard *kaccā* and *pakkā* rules, though the details were not universally agreed upon, were often invoked as well as the notion of the superiority of cooked foods over raw. In many cases, the act of cooking was further described as intimately related to the performance of household *pūjā* by women (see Ghosh, 1995), the one action triggering mention of the other because both link the use of fire and the purity of the body. The modern *pativratā* must keep her body, her clothes, her kitchen space, and her utensils pure when dealing with food and fire. Purity laws, so emphasized in the history of male-led rituals, accentuate the parallel between the power of the priest in the temple and the *pativratā* in the kitchen.

Religious notions of purity are especially apparent in the prohibitions against women cooking or doing daily worship (*pūjā*) at certain times. Hindu women are forbidden to cook or touch the family's food and water during menstruation. According to my informants, the length of this proscription ranged between three and ten days, with shorter terms and lower caste commonly showing a positive correlation. A fertile woman's reproductive abilities are thus explicitly related to cooking: a woman who has failed to conceive (i.e., a menstruating woman) cannot cook; likewise, a new mother cannot cook, typically for twenty-one–forty days after giving birth, because she cannot conceive. In the same vein, a newly married woman should not light the fire for cooking or worship, typically for twenty–forty days after her wedding, at which point, the new bride prepares a feast for the husband and her new in-laws and becomes the "official" cook for her husband.

Personal notions of purity were a daily concern among the housewives I interviewed who prepared food. Several women described elaborate morning preparations and precautions before performing worship and cooking the first meal. These included washing the body and hair and putting on a new sari. One village women told me that she waited to defecate until after cooking the first food of the day. Most concurred that, at the very least, one should wash and put on clean clothes before cooking. All removed footwear before entering the kitchen, and the kitchen or kitchen space itself is kept as clean as possible.

The ritual connections between women, food, purity, and the household are also expressed in the performance of vows (*vratas*), a duty inherent in the term itself, *pativratā*. The ideal wife, by cooking and maintaining the house, fulfills her dharmic vows. While *vratas* are not literally connected to cooking, they *are* literally connected with food, as the term most commonly refers to women's fasting practices. Hindu women can and do control food for the family, and this in itself is a locus of power; when a women controls and restricts the food that enters into her own body, it is an extension and internalization of this power.

Different vows require varying degrees of disciplining food intake by the woman. By practicing asceticism in fulfillment of such vows, the *pativratā* continues to generate creative and transformative heat, *tapas*. The woman (*tapasvin*) gains significant powers, powers that are usually limited to men. There are excellent studies of *vratas* (see McGee, 1987; Pearson, 1996; McDaniel, 2009); however, I want to note here that the *vratas* maintain the complementary functions for women in the home with respect not only to the temple priests but also to the male ascetics who, through the fulfillment of their vows or *vratas* of self-denial, acquire great control over themselves and the sacred. Mary McGee (1987: 336), in tracing the history and character of *vratas*, notes that "in many ways, to be a *pativratā* is the *vrata par excellence* of women" and that to be a *pativratā*, the wife must undergo fasts at different times and occasions. Almost every Hindu woman performs fasts not only to promote the well-being of her family but also because "it gives me peace of mind" (Pearson, 1996).[6]

The *Pativratā* and Feminist Thealogy

Sītā the cook is a modern mythic role model in a particularly Hindu expression of the control women have always had in India, whether or not it is acknowledged as such. Hindu perceptions of gender empowerment have been expressed in different ways at different times. In terms of sacred feminine as the locus of authority for women, goddesses are not inherently empowering or disempowering for women but are filtered through human agents: "[T]here are potentially empowering interpretations of goddesses that may or may not be effectively appropriated, just as there are potentially disempowering interpretations of the same goddess" (Pintchman, 2000: 191). Sītā, divine *pativratā*, has been a historically malleable figure: she has been and can continue to be a model of empowerment, depending upon the construction of her authority.

Sītā as a historically powerful *pativratā* has been invoked by, for example, nineteenth-century Hindu reformers and activists in the independence and nationalist movements, in part in reaction to earlier Western critiques of roles for Hindu women. Christian missionaries and evangelical reformers within the British administration had come to regard Hindu women collectively as "abject victims of a decadent, priest-ridden system." The Hindu response was to agree that Hindu women were then being kept ignorant and downtrodden but to argue that this situation had not always been the case: the epic heroines such as Sītā had inhabited a golden age wherein "Hindu women had been men's social equals and the religious system [Hinduism] had been pure" (Ratte, 1985: 355).

In the early twentieth century, Sarojini Naidu, a political and social activist, likewise located the power of women in the classical *pativratās* of epic tradition, but she regarded her contemporaries as positive agents of change rather than victims. The golden age still existed for Naidu, who found in Sītā a powerful heroine/*pativratā* and a proactive model for "subjugated" women/Mother India. She focused on Sītā as the exemplar of an ideal alive in those Hindu women who personified love and service and sacrifice while playing a role in the cause of independence:

> Why are the names of Sītā [and] Sāvitrī . . . so sacred and commonplace in every household and the cause of inspiration? . . . It is spiritual understanding and intellectual development that made them great . . . No one can be greater than a good woman . . . cooperating and [providing] help to suffering humanity are nation building works. (367–368)

Naidu was well aware that this description might further a view of Hindu women as necessarily subservient; thus, she was careful to specify that the "good woman" included not only the traditional housewife but also the newly educated independent woman, both of whom can function as *pativratās* to the nation. As Ratte notes, by invoking the *pativratā*/heroine to represent all modern Hindu women, Naidu provided nationalist society with a different view of gender, one that sanctioned nontraditional behavior through traditional references: Sītā and Satī were presented as active heroines, examples of embodied action for the twentieth-century Indian woman.

The notion of the *pativratā* came to be troped very differently by later feminists and nationalists, however. Sītā and Satī have once again become popular examples of the ultimate victimization of women by Hinduism. The Hindu nationalist movement has portrayed especially

Sītā as the quintessential Hindu wife, mother, and nation/motherland who has been or could be "kidnapped" (raped) by the Muslim "demons." In this scenario, Hindu men are to emulate Rāma in his role as active protector and rescuer, while Sītā is to remain passive and vulnerable. Modern Western feminist responses to the *pativratā* likewise see in Sītā primarily an obedient, self-sacrificing woman. They are unable to find any element of proactive choice in the Sītā who follows Rāma into the forest, accepts the trial by fire and banishment, gives birth while alone in the forest, and for the good of the kingdom chooses to descend into the earth. The very best that Western feminism has said about her is that Sītā can function as a "relevant and comforting model of wifehood" (Gross, 2000: 107). Many Indian feminists informed by Western feminism concur with this response.[7]

Hindu feminists who can see past the Western critique and who can unpack the meanings of the iconography of Sītā and her *rasoī*s, can employ them as expressions of female empowerment. Madhu Kishwar has begun to articulate a different view of Sītā with her article, published in *Manushi* in 1997, "Yes to Sītā, No to Ram":

> While for women, Sītā represents an example of the ideal wife, for men she is Sītā *mātā* not just the daughter of the earth . . . but Mother Earth herself who inspires awe and reverence. By shaping themselves in the Sītā mold, women often manage to acquire enormous clout and power over their husbands and family.

In the political realm, such reversal of power could have very real (and to my mind, very positive) consequences for legislative agendas; whether such a reversal is the desideratum for daily relationships is more open to question, however.

Since 1997, Indian feminists, and Kishwar herself, have gone much further in exploring how "the social and political power of any religious symbol depends on a cultural context that imbues it with meaningful interpretations tied into a network of shared beliefs, values, and stories" (Pintchman, 2000: 198). Acknowledgment of the traditional power of the *pativratā* as "cook" empowers Hindu women in ways that the importation of Western paradigms cannot, building on the historical connection between women's daily work and the well-being of all India. Kathleen Erndl (Pintchman 2001: 15) argues that ordinary Hindu devotees move with ease between universal and particular notions of the goddess in both their ritual and their devotional lives. Both Sītā and Satī are intimately connected to the sacred fire and to the divine fertility of the earth. The impulse behind the

conflation of the two shrines in two sacred landscapes may be a pragmatic valorization of the importance of the kitchen and the kitchen fire for the human *pativratā*. Sītā, concretely portrayed as cooking in her *rasoī* shrines builds on an ancient and modern notion that women's daily work in the kitchen—like the daily acts of the Brahmin in the temple—are regarded as vital actions for the maintenance of the world.

The *Sītā Rasoī*s have become established fixtures of reconfigured sacred space in Ayodhyā and Citrakūt *because*, I would argue, Sītā has been and can continue to be a powerful and empowering model for Hindu women. In looking at the extant *rasoī* shrines and the extinct or nonexistent *pīṭhasthāna*s in Ayodhyā and Citrakūt, one might say that the survival of the *Sītā Rasoī* is a gloss not only on the feminine sacrality of both local and transcendent place but on the vital and proactive domestic role of the *pativratā* and her correlation to the welfare of the whole of India. While Western feminism has rejected the kitchen as a place of power, admitting no cultural basis for assessing it as such and often linking it directly to the subordination of women, Hindu feminists can draw on a concretely portrayed tradition in which the daily work of women in the kitchen is regarded as sacred action. Although it leaves most Western feminists at a loss, in Hindu tradition a woman's place of power can be situated *in the kitchen*.

The sacred geography of the Hindu home centers on the kitchen (Ghosh, 1995: 21) and in that space, food preparation becomes the quintessential domestic religion and the guarantee of the family and the country's well-being. Without Hindu women fulfilling their prescribed role in the home, all aspects of life—religious, social, political, and economic—would collapse, at least in theory, according to Hindu tradition. Power grounded in a long-standing perception of the kitchen as feminine sacred space is not to be lightly cast aside just because it does not have any positive correlation in Western culture. In the ongoing struggle to define liberation for women around the world, it behooves women to build from their existing spaces of power, even or especially if it is the kitchen—it could well empower them to act to promote and protect the well-being not only for their immediate family but also for the community as a whole. If the *pativratā* is mapped as the body of the nation, then her work must be valued as central to the survival of the nation. Rather than appropriating the individualist ideals of Western feminism, Hindu feminism can build on principles grounded in the idea! of the *pativratā*, the woman who has the health and welfare of the entire nation as her mandate.

NOTES

1. Julia Leslie (1989: 189) tackles the question of *satī* (suttee) as it is dealt with by Tryambakayajvan's *Strīdharmapaddhati* ("Guide to the Religious Status and Duties of Women"). While it is a choice for the Hindu wife (i.e., she chooses not to become a widow), there is also the choice to end one's status of "wife" and take on the status of "widow-renunciate."
2. See my descriptions and pictures in Herman, 2000.
3. Sircar (1973) notes a "germ" of early textual evidence in the *Ṛg Veda* (10.61.5–70), which recounts a violation of a nameless daughter by her father. In the *Brāhmaṇas*, this theme is elaborated on and the father is named as Prajāpati (see, e.g., Ś. *Br.* I.VII.4.1–8; and *Ait. Br.* III.33–34). Prajāpati, identified with sacrifice, is punished for his incest by the gods, who have him pierced by Rudra's arrow. The wound to Prajāpati results in his seminal fluid (*retas*) falling on the ground. In the epic *Mahābharata* (XII.282–83), there is a description of King Dakṣa's sacrifice and its destruction by Śiva, alerted to the insult by his wife, Satī, who is not identified as Dakṣa's daughter. The story of Dakṣa's sacrifice is elaborated by Kālidāsa; in his version, Satī, now the daughter of Dakṣa, commits suicide by fire having been insulted by the lack of invitation to her and her husband (5). The dismemberment is added in later texts. Thus, if Sircar's history is correct, what was "male" power in the early texts becomes "female" power in the later recensions, particularly through the transformation wrought by fire.
4. There is a conflation of Sītā and Satī mythology in terms of a pilgrimage site dedicated to the goddess Vaiṣṇo Devī: "One compendium of descriptions of pilgrimage sites repeats 'old folklore' that it was actually Vaiṣṇo Devī who was born as Satī…Satī became curious about Lord Rāma and took the form of Sītā to observe him, but Rāma immediately knew who she was. Śiva found out what Satī had done and became enraged…Satī then performed terrible penances…she eventually became Pārvatī and…she continues to perform *tapas* at the cave of Trikūṭa" (Rajiv; quoted by Rohe, 2001: 65).
5. Susan Sered (1992: 10) elaborates on this theme in some detail, referring to the domestication of religion: "[it is] a process in which people who profess their allegiance to a wider religious tradition personalize the rituals, institutions, symbols, and theology of that wider system in order to safeguard the health, happiness, and security of particular people with whom they are linked in relationships of caring and interdependence."
6. Several women quoted me those exact words. Madhu Kishwar, when I visited her in Delhi in December 2003, was fasting, i.e., allowing herself limited intake of only certain foods. She cited the cleansing, peaceful, and healthful effects of fasting, but not the religious. Is it

possible that even the most secularized Indian woman sees the benefits of food restriction if only for the strength and peace of her own body and mind?

7. At a conference in Delhi, I read a part of this essay and was roundly criticized by an Indian woman who felt my topic was, in fact, *anti-feminist*: "Don't put us back in the kitchen!" In my location of the importance of Sītā as cook/ritualist, she saw a displacement of the importance of the professional woman. This is not what a connection with food preparation means for *Indian* women and I do not mean the ideal to be always a *literal* one. It is, however, a practical approach for "women who stay in the family life, *vratas* are the most important religious practices for redemption, spiritual elevation and even release from *saṃsāra*. What renouncers achieve by leaving the family life, women achieve within the family by practicing austerity and self-restraint required for the observance of the rituals of countless *vratas*" (Gupta, 2000: 103).

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CHAPTER 5

Spreading Śakti

Karen Pechilis

Introduction

Rita Sherma's methodological discussion of perspective in the study of religion in the introduction to this volume is an important new contribution to the continuing scholarly consideration of relationships among the self, the subject, and knowledge. She emphasizes that engagement, critical distance, and articulation are inseparably intertwined modes in a methodology of scholarly inquiry that fosters the creation of empathetic scholarly knowledge.[1] She argues that intersubjective construction, "in which the scholar experiences, integrates, and reflects on the encounter," involves both engagement and critical reflection within the encounter between knower and subject, while dialexis, "in which the scholar is intellectually engaged while taking into account that different cultures have divergent emotional, aesthetic and intellectual styles," involves both self-reflection and a recognition of difference in the articulation of the knowledge produced within the encounter. The interface between the two modes contours scholarly study, bringing together both personal engagement and critical study in the formation of scholarly knowledge. The nexus of the hermeneutics of intersubjectivity, constructive reflection, and dialexis is an encouraging methodology, recognizing experience (emotional, aesthetic), critical reflection (on the scholar's own experience as well as diverse sources of information about the subject), and articulation (dialogue with scholarly discourse) in its validation of the exploratory nature of scholarly knowledge.

The exploratory quality is vital to the definition of scholarship. In the U.S. educational system the culture of academia is a voluntary

association: in theory, anyone can study anything. Credentials in a subject of study are earned through study over time in an accredited academic program. That time is spent in exploring possibilities of interpretation, being aware of a multiplicity of perspectives, and formulating one's own ideas in order to advance scholarly understanding of the self, the subject, and the creation of knowledge. Exploration is a "structure of feeling" in the making of the culture of academia, a fundamental attitude that informs research and teaching.[2]

Scholarship is more about the exploration of inquiry than the consolidation of identity. It is one of the ironies of our era of globalization that a prominent response to the increased awareness of difference is the attempted consolidation of selfhood by insistence on what one perceives to be one's own tradition. In this case, the multiple possibilities inherent in selfhood are subordinated, as noted by Madhu Kishwar (1999: 251–267, 251–252):

> Every human being is the product of many cross-cutting, multilayered identities...For the most part, people take these identity layers for granted and they find expression in their appropriate realms at different points of time. However, a group or person may begin to assert a particular identity with greater vigor if it provides greater access to power and opportunities...Alternately, a person begins to assign a high priority to a particular basic identity if she or he perceives it as threatened or suppressed, especially if that identity is essential to the person's personal, economic or social well-being.[3]

Perhaps it is not surprising that there is an emphasis on ownership—exclusive ownership—in an increasingly globalized capitalist context. In terms of religious *practice*, this approach could be characterized as fundamentalism.[4] In terms of *scholarship* in religion, this approach could be characterized as the study of a specific religion without meaningful discussion of other religions, of interdisciplinary methodology, or of religion as a category. Rita D. Sherma (2008: 1–18) describes this kind of dynamic as "'hermeneutical reductionism' which objectifies elements of religious traditions and deadens the possibility of Gadamer's 'fusion of horizons.'"

At the other end of the spectrum would be the attempt to globalize: to purposefully engage with multiple cultural formations. One understands oneself to exist in a multilayered context, with multiple identities, also as per Kishwar's discussion. In terms of religious *practice*, this approach could be characterized as institutional ecumenicalism, or a personal commitment to a diversity of religious thought and practice. In terms of *scholarship* in religion, this approach could

be characterized as the study of a specific religion accompanied by meaningful discussion of other religions (on a synchronic or a diachronic basis), of interdisciplinary methodology, or of religion as a category.

The two paths involve distinctive, though interrelated, perspectives on the self-reflection necessary for scholarship, which is another supporting "structure of feeling" that encourages exploration in the production of scholarly knowledge. This is an awareness of the Other that applies to the method of scholarship; or, as Sherma aptly discusses in the introduction to this volume, to the intersubjective exchange or "conversation" that is necessary for understanding. Scholarship insists on the active recognition of critical distance between the scholar and the subject or object of knowledge (with issues of perspective disclosed by the seeming interchangeability of these terms, though Sherma cogently argues for regarding the Other as subject in her introduction); this critical distance has been explicitly problematized in studies that provide meaningful discussion of religions, interdisciplinary method, or religion as a category, while it has taken on a polemical cast, or been ignored completely, in studies that lack such components. However, even if not acknowledged in this latter type of study, personal engagement always brings a distinctive outsider perspective to a subject. Even if one chooses to present oneself as representative of the subject due to tradition, heritage, depth of study, and so on, it can be argued that if one is not the author or in any other way the progenitor of the subject of study, then one is an outsider whose knowledge is at least in part based on one's own personal experience of that specific subject. Alternatively, one can acknowledge at the outset that one's primary concern relates to a perspective or tradition that is outside of the subject of study's self-definition.

It is this latter situation that I take up in this essay; specifically, sympathetically deconstructing and reconstructing Western feminist scholarship's attempts to understand a Hindu-inspired spiritual path that does not, according to its publications and programs, take an explicit stand with respect to feminism. This Hindu-inspired spiritual path is Siddha Yoga. What feminist scholarship and Siddha Yoga have in common is that they are both attempts to connect with an "Other." Western feminist scholarship seeks to understand women in non-Western cultures, and Siddha Yoga, which originated in India, seeks to continue its establishment in and engagement with Western cultures. The aspect of Siddha Yoga that has especially attracted Western feminist scholarship is its leadership by a Hindu female guru, Gurumayi. In this essay, I critically examine the nature of feminist

scholars' encounter with and the terms of their analysis of Siddha Yoga through intersubjective construction and dialexis.

Western Feminist Expectations and Hindu Women Gurus

I came to the study of Hindu female gurus a few years ago, through my collaborative study of traditional religions new to the American suburban context under the auspices of the Harvard Pluralism Project Affiliate Program.[5] The Siddha Yoga ashram in South Fallsburg in the Catskills, some ninety miles from New York City, was in my general surrounding region of study, and I was especially interested in the leadership of Siddha Yoga by Swami Chidvilasananda (also known as Gurumayi), a present-day Hindu female guru. A dimension of my interest was the feminist discussion of the presence or the absence of female leaders in world religions, a timely and contested topic. Female Hindu gurus, including the late Anandamayi Ma and the present-day Ammachi, Shree Maa, Mother Meera, and the focus of my study, Gurumayi, seemed to be candidates overdue for feminist scholarly analysis, given their prominence as religious leaders with thousands of devoted followers worldwide. However, when I turned to feminist studies that included discussion of Gurumayi, I noticed conflicting opinions on the guru's "fit" with Western feminism.

On the one hand, scholar Catherine Wessinger (1993) identifies characteristics associated with the Asian traditions of Hinduism and Buddhism that challenge the patriarchal biblical traditions. For example, she understands women's leadership in Siddha Yoga and in Buddhist groups in America to result from a specific combination of characteristics, including the lack of an exclusive male deity and a context of women's social equality:

> The history of Hinduism and Buddhism demonstrates that androgynous, neuter or female conceptions of the divine are not sufficient in and of themselves to promote equality for women. But once there is a social expectation of the equality of women [such as in the American context], conceptions of the divine that de-emphasize the masculine prove attractive to women and support them in legitimating their presence in religious leadership roles. (139–140)

Additional factors that support the emergence of women's religious leadership, according to Wessinger, include the ideal that women's roles are not limited to wife and mother, and a de-emphasis on

associating women with the fall of humankind. Although Wessinger states that Siddha Yoga "is not an explicitly feminist movement," and she betrays her own mistrust of guru traditions as "patriarchal authority, even when it is being exercised by a woman," she does tend to assimilate Siddha Yoga with a feminist critique of patriarchy in biblical traditions (135, 139; cf. Pechilis, 2004: 237).

On the other hand, Elizabeth Puttick (1997: 192, also 188) identifies Gurumayi, along with the present-day Hindu female guru Nirmala Devi (also known as Sri Mataji, the founder of Sahaja Yoga), as "explicitly antifeminist. Puttick characterizes Gurumayi's teachings as follows in support of this view: "As with most Hindu-based N[ew] R[eligious] M[ovement]s, Siddha Yoga theology has a misogynistic streak, with a particular emphasis on *māyā*, the illusory state of consciousness that causes suffering—personified as a woman" (181). She also contrasts what she considers to be the "feminine," bhakti (devotional and participatory) leadership style of other Hindu female gurus (notably Mother Meera, Anandamayi Ma, and Ammachi) with the "androgynous" style of leadership characteristic of Gurumayi and Nirmala Devi, "which steers a middle path between cultivating the traditional masculine models, with the danger of taking on their flaws to an even greater degree, or adhering too closely to a feminine model, which lacks toughness in a confrontation or crisis" (194).[6] The specific examples by which both authors register the gap between feminism's self-definition and that of Siddha Yoga point to larger underlying issues: When we ask, "Is the subject feminist?" what are we really asking? How do we respond to whether or not the subject identifies herself as feminist? Are we trying to determine whether or not the subject displays characteristics that we associate with feminism? Are we trying to assess the subject's usefulness for feminism? Is our attempt exploratory, toward discovering both common ground as well as difference? Or is it assessment, toward our acceptance or rejection of the subject?[7]

The difference between the exploratory and the evaluative modes discloses two constitutive parts of feminism: its status as a critical academic perspective and as a sociopolitical movement. The two are interrelated, especially in their common critique of the patriarchal premise that men are central and women are marginal (in both the realms of scholarship and the social world), and through the knowledge that feminist scholarship provides to the sociopolitical movement: "Feminism as a social vision relies upon the results of feminist scholarship in history, sociology, and psychology, as well as religion. The most important conclusion of feminist scholarship is that

patriarchy is the cultural creation of a certain epoch in human history, not an inevitable necessity of human beings" (Gross, 1996: 23, 28). The issue is whether or not these two parts are coextensive, and the scholar's or the scholar-activist's perspective should be disclosed by responding to the questions presented earlier. Seen from this perspective, both Wessinger and Puttick are on the more activist side of feminist scholarship, directing their remarks toward a feminist assessment of Siddha Yoga's practices.

Reframing the inquiry in a more exploratory perspective provides creative space for the work of intersubjective construction and dialexis. We can note that although Wessinger's and Puttick's perspectives weigh in with distinctive assessments of Gurumayi's leadership, they both privilege a mode of classification that measures Siddha Yoga in relation to Western feminist ideals; their dialexis especially emphasizes women's equality and androgyny, both of which were mainstay principles of second-wave feminism but are contested in third-wave feminisms (earned status—hierarchy—is not necessarily bad; gender can be deconstructed beyond the supposed synthesis of androgyny).[8]

For example, *māyā* is understood by Puttick to be "the illusory state of consciousness that causes suffering—personified as a woman." More accurately, the relationship between *māyā* and women is complexly imagined in Hindu tradition, especially in the synthesis of gender and philosophy in classical Hindu mythological stories (found in the Purāṇas). The influential Advaita Vedanta image of *māyā* as a genderless (though the term itself is feminine in grammar) constituent cosmological component that is both creative and delusive is linked to the feminine gender and especially goddesses in later mythological stories.[9] In her contemporary discussion, Spivak (2001: 132) suggests that *māyā* is "fiction": "I propose to translate *Māyā* as 'fiction,' an English word philosophically unconnected with prose . . . *Māyā* in the limited sense or translation of 'illusion' has given trouble to readers and believers through the centuries. *Māyā* as 'fiction' would carry the paradox of the range of power of this antonym to 'truth.'" "Fiction" is "forming," especially imaginative formations, which underscores its separation, as feminine, from female. In patriarchal tradition, feminine is conceptual; female is conception. The former is more amenable to appropriation, ownership, internalization, assimilation; the body of the latter gets in the way of all of that.[10] An association of *māyā* with women is possible when women themselves reclaim the concept for the illuminating powers it is said to have. A related example would be scholar

Lina Gupta's (1991) feminist reclamation of the goddess Kālī from an encrustation of patriarchal interpretations, in which she views the iconography of the Goddess as an expression of women's rage against male oppression and confinement of women.[11]

Gupta's approach resonates with Western streams of feminist spirituality, which Cynthia Eller (1993: 6, 236, n. 5) defines with reference to five characteristics: "valuing women's empowerment, practicing ritual and/or magic, revering nature, using the feminine or gender as a primary mode of religious analysis, and espousing the revisionist version of Western history favored by the movement," of which she emphasizes the empowerment of women and the revisionist view of history, which reclaims an oppressed yet extant tradition of goddess worship across the globe. And yet there is a significant difference between the two perspectives: the implications of continuous versus discontinuous goddess traditions are not the same.

Continuous Goddess Traditions and Authority in Female Spiritual Leaders

In India, Hindu goddesses have had a continuous public presence in religious life for millennia, while in the Western context, goddess traditions have been marginalized, forced underground, or destroyed. From a feminist perspective, the implication of these divergent histories is that Hindu goddesses have a long history of patriarchal interpretation, which Gupta, for example, strives to undo. In contrast, goddesses in Western traditions are believed to have either always had women in secretive societies as custodians, or they have been abandoned; in either case, they may not have been subjected to layers of patriarchal interpretation, and can directly be endowed with current feminist meanings.

Awareness of this difference needs to inform Western feminist understandings of Hindu goddesses as well as their dialexis in presenting meanings to others, such as the efforts of Rita Gross (1978), who supports reimagining the Hindu goddess across cultures and religions.[12] The rhetorical force of her reinterpretation is to open possibilities of the meaning and significance of a subject to people who are located in a different cultural milieu than the symbol's home culture (although this mode privileges spatial orientation, it is operative across time as well, it is relevant equally for those in a culture that is historically discontinuous with the context of the symbol as well as those in a culture that is historically continuous

with it). Gross (1996: 233) understands herself to be a "translator of symbolic meanings":

> Although I insist on portraying Hindu materials accurately, I focus on what contemporary Western seekers might learn from these images and symbols, rather than on what they mean in the Hindu context. I do not suggest that Jews and Christians begin to worship Hindu goddesses, but that specific symbols, images, and myths already well developed in the Hindu context might be inspiring to Christians and Jews as they attempt to reimagine their monotheistic deity. I look deeply into the Hindu tradition for insights about the meanings of goddess symbolism and suggest how those symbols might appear when translated into contemporary Western religious discourse.

Siddha Yoga is also engaged in the cultural translation of Hindu traditions to Westerners; however, the organization's ethos involves neither a sense of reclamation nor one of reimagining a monotheistic deity. The cornerstone is instead an idea of the universal significance and applicability of a specific spiritual path. If the issue is framed as one of accessibility, then many aspects of Siddha Yoga can be pointed to, including its establishment of ashrams worldwide, most in the vicinity of major metropolitan areas; its self-identification as a spiritual path rather than a religion (Hindu-inspired rather than Hinduism), and thus its stance as compatible, rather than at variance, with other religious identities its devotees may have; publication of its teachings in many languages; open registration for its programs; and its emphasis on God language but general avoidance of the traditional Hindu mythological stories that contextualize the deities in classical thought. An important example of the latter is Śiva who, in Siddha Yoga, is paramount to Ultimate Reality, and the light of Pure Consciousness. In certain Hindu scriptures, however, he is depicted as the heroic deity of mythical narratives. In Siddha Yoga, he is perceived in terms of his transcendent nature, represented as a divine light, and not as the agent of eight heroic deeds as in mythology.[13] In furtherance of its aspiration toward universality and practicality, its many programs encourage devotees to apply the teachings directly to their lives in the wider world.

If the issue is framed as one of authenticity, other aspects of Siddha Yoga can be highlighted, including the establishment of traditional-style residential spiritual retreats (ashrams and the *gurukula* residential teaching mode in which the student lives at the home of the guru); teachings and ritual practices based on authoritative, classical Sanskrit texts; centrality of the traditional Hindu practices of

meditation, *seva* (voluntary, selfless service), chanting, and vegetarianism; and the establishment of the Muktabodha Indological Research Institute, "dedicated to the study, preservation and dissemination of the ancient spiritual wisdom of India."[14] In Siddha Yoga, the universality of accessibility frames the specificity of tradition.

Underlying Siddha Yoga's practice of universality is a philosophy of universality. In addition to its manifestation in cultural, geographical, and ritual dimensions, the encounter between particularity and universality has resonances in the central philosophy of Siddha Yoga. Siddha Yoga emphasizes a subtle, divine essence that connects all living beings; this essence is most often called *śakti* in the tradition. *Śakti* is a classical term in Hinduism meaning "spiritual power" or "divine energy," and is explicitly associated with the feminine in classical texts of mythology, philosophy, and law.[15] *Śakti* is gendered by the widespread historical representation of it as especially concentrated in the feminine principle, the Goddess, and women.[16] The Great Goddess (Mahādevī), Matrix of the Cosmos, and the creative power of Śiva, is simply referred to as "*Śakti*" particularly in tantric-influenced theological traditions that are the roots of Siddha Yoga. Thus, *śakti* refers to the power of enlightened realization, associated with the divine feminine, and attainable through in-depth spiritual practice; *Śakti*, as the Great Goddess is also the term used to denote the Mother of the Universe, as dynamic, pervasive, divine energy, perceived as feminine. I have discussed elsewhere Gurumayi and Siddha Yoga's degendering and regendering of the guru and *śakti* through performance[17]; here I explore Siddha Yoga's teachings through the overlapping themes of the relationship between the human and divine, the devotee and the guru, and the feminine and female through the idea and practice of *śakti*, in which the validation of personal experience is central.

In Hinduism, a guru is classically understood to be a human being whose perfect spiritual realization reveals humankind's inherent divinity, and makes possible other human beings' achievement of perfect spiritual realization. Female gurus add the complexity of *śakti* to this basic definition, whether in classical stories, where they are depicted as wives; in historical stories, where their steadfast devotion, love of learning, and public teaching puts them in conflict with the patriarchal social world; and in the twentieth century and the contemporary era, when women gurus have actively associated themselves with feminine imagery.[18] For example, most of the female gurus active in the twentieth century and today have had the appellation "Ma" (Mother) in their titles, including Gauri Ma, Anandamayi Ma, Ma Jaya, Jayashri Ma, Shree Ma, Anandi Ma, Karunamayi Ma, Meera

Ma, Ammachi (Mata Amritanandamayi), and Ganga Ma. Gurumayi does not have "Ma" in her title, but her title can be understood as "guru-mother."[19]

"Mother" is a term of respect in common parlance in India; traditionally, kinship terms are used in social conversation rather than given first names. In ordinary society, however, there would tend to be a match between the social nomenclature of mother and the biological fact of motherhood; but this connection is ruptured in the persona of the female guru. The female gurus' use of feminine imagery supports a paradigm of renunciation and the rejection of socially defined womanhood. As Madhu Khanna (2000: 116) notes, citing June McDaniel:

> In *śākta* circles, all women—be they young maidens or mature women—are addressed as *Mā* or *Devī* or *Vīrā*. This title protects women from being looked on in sexual terms. As it is rightly pointed out, "To call a woman 'mother' is a classic way for an Indian male to deflect a woman's hint at marriage or a courtesan's proposition."[20]

The deflection, of course, works in both ways: If female gurus do have a husband (e.g., Anandamayi Ma, Ma Jaya, Meera Ma), that relationship is very much subordinated to their identities as chaste gurus.

Relationships with men are constituted within the guru-disciple relationship: A female guru's husband is characterized as her disciple (e.g., Anandamayi Ma); some of the female gurus have men as chief disciples (e.g., Ammachi, Gurumayi); and several of the female gurus themselves had male gurus (e.g., Gauri Ma, Ma Jaya, Jayashri Ma, Mother Meera, Gurumayi).[21] In the case of Gurumayi, she was initiated into *samnyāsin*-hood (monastic life) by her guru; the question of marriage never emerged, as it did in the biographies of most other female gurus. The female gurus themselves provide women with a legitimate alternative to the culturally mandated roles of wife and mother, and they enact their guruhood in the public realm; for example, Anandamayi Ma went from purdah to appearing before thousands with her head and face uncovered, framed by her long unbound hair.[22]

Further, as perfect embodiments of *śakti*, female gurus are understood by Hindu tradition and by their followers alike to be manifestations of the Goddess. Many of the contemporary female gurus are viewed as embodiments of specific goddesses.[23] I have found that while devotees do understand Gurumayi to be the Goddess, they do

not tend to identify her with a specific form of the Goddess, save for their rather playful suggestions that the paintings of Lakshmi, the Goddess of wealth, placed around the ashram at locations where devotees can make a donation, bear a striking resemblance to the guru—this is in part at least an acknowledgment that the SYDA organization the guru leads is extremely wealthy. Generally speaking, the guru is the Goddess in a personal, interactive mode, primarily that of teacher. The guru is a divine teacher; she is a universal teacher.

Feminists have long remarked that the Hindu Goddess symbolizes the universality of the feminine principle. The figure of the female guru adds another dimension, by positing that, through the embodied persona of the Hindu female guru, *female is universal.* The guru is like the Goddess in that she is both divine and universal; she is like the saints in that she is an embodied, religiously devoted woman. The female guru is both, and in that capacity, the demonstration that "female is universal" belongs most appropriately to her. As Western feminists have discussed, the operative formula in patriarchal societies is to view maleness and male experience as universal, while femaleness and female experience is particular and thus limited. Hindu female gurus innovatively challenge this paradigm, rejecting patriarchal assumptions. The Hindu female guru is universal through her nature, power, presence, and teachings. Female gurus participate in the Tantric understanding of *māyā*, which has a universal identity distinctive from the meanings of *māyā* emphasized by many Western feminists and the Advaita Vedanta idea of it discussed earlier in this essay. Rita D. Sherma (1998: 115) has captured this difference:

> In Advaita Vedanta, for example, the world is said to be a product of *māyā*, both *māyā* and its result being ontologically dubious: neither real (for nothing is real but the Nirguna Brahman) nor totally unreal (for the world does have a provisional validity as the common experience of all who are not liberated). *Māyā*, in Tantra, on the other hand, is the fully real power of the Goddess to differentiate herself into the multiple forms of the fully real universe. In Tantra, reality has two aspects: the manifest world and self-existent, unmanifest potentiality. The universe is the embodiment of the Goddess and as such, not only real in an ontological sense, but a sacred hierophany. [A]s *māyā-śakti*, she becomes the necessary power of differentiation by which all contrasting forms and phenomena are created and the underlying unity is veiled.

The female guru embodies both the universal unity and the particular manifestation in the world that points to this unity. The

universal outreach of Siddha Yoga takes place through the guru's transmission of *śakti* (here, implying the power to attain insight of the universal unity and thus spiritual liberation) to the devotee; this process is known as *śaktipat*. At its most fundamental level, *śaktipat* occurs through the intention (*sankalpa*) of the guru. The guru's intention may become manifest to the devotee in several different ways: through the physical presence or touch of the guru, through the teaching activities of a representative of the guru (such as a Siddha Yogaswami), through an image of the guru (many photographs of the guru are sold in Siddha Yoga bookshops), or through a visionary experience that the devotee has of the guru. Through *śaktipat*, the guru transmits the power of enlightened awakening to the devotee. The transmission of *śaktipat* is understood to be a beginning of the devotee's fruitful spiritual activities, or as an encouragement to devotees already on the path; it is never understood to be an endpoint or culmination. As the biography of Gurumayi, which emphasizes her own spiritual practice (*sādhana*) prior to becoming the guru, suggests, the devotee's own spiritual practice is essential.[24]

The nature and goal of the devotee's spiritual practice should not be confused with any idea that the devotee is attempting to, or even aspires to, become the guru in terms of the guru's leadership of the Siddha Yoga organization. Instead, the goal of the devotee is to raise her spiritual awareness up to the level of the guru's. The history of Siddha Yoga demonstrates that the successor guru is chosen completely at the decision and discretion of the current guru, and there is never a public rationale provided for the specific choice. Within this frame, the biographies of the second guru in Siddha Yoga, Swami Muktananda, and the current guru, Gurumayi, emphasize that they engaged in intense spiritual practice prior to becoming the guru. Through the guru and the ashram, both *śakti* and *sādhana* are accessible to the devotee. All devotees have the potential to achieve the enlightened inner state that characterizes the guru because each devotee participates in the guru's spiritual field through *śaktipat* and practice. The guru is a particularized emblem of universality, a paradox that reveals the contrast between the goals of feminist goddess spirituality and the path of female gurus:

> Power, self affirmation, and celebration of earth energy are not the goal: conscious immersion in a reality that precedes earth and ego is more to the point. Because of this divergence of emphasis, the teachings of India's women of spirit are to some degree out of sync with the present evocation of Goddess energy in the West. (Johnsen, 1994: 26)

This is an important, yet poorly understood premise: The guru has both personal style and universal consciousness.

Perhaps more than their spiritual ideologies, it is the constituencies of feminist goddess spirituality and of the path of female gurus that overlap in the United States, for in both cases a large number of educated, affluent Euro-American women are devotees. Siddha Yoga is prowomen in its encouragement of women to explore a progressive spiritual path as well as healthy life choices, and in its placement of women devotees in leadership positions, including swamis, scholars, *seva* (service) leaders, and public relations spokespeople. This affirmation must be understood, however, in the context of the decentering of gender in the philosophical teachings of the path. In Siddha Yoga, the "conscious immersion in a reality that precedes earth and ego" is, in terms of the guru's yearly message for 2004 and 2005, "Experience the POWER within: Kundalini Shakti."[25] *Kuṇḍalinī śakti* is a yogic interpretation of *śakti* as a subtle power located within the subtle body, analogous to the physical body at the base of one's spine. This yearly message of the guru can be gendered, as when devotees are encouraged to experience the divine "in all her infinitely diverse forms," or when a devotee refers to *kuṇḍalinī śakti* as a "goddess" or even *māyā*.[26] But the message can also be ungendered, as with a devotee's discussion of *Kuṇḍalinī śakti* as a "divine power."[27] The common thread among these perspectives, and between feminist goddess spirituality and the path of the female guru, is the validation of personal experience insofar as it relates to, or can be made to relate to, the teachings.

Practice and Gathering: Transcending Gender and Affirming Gender

In his famous study of Eastern religions in the United States in the 1970s, Harvey Cox (1997: 9) highlighted the participatory mode:

> The influence of Oriental spirituality in the West is hardly something new... But there is something new about the present situation. In previous decades, interest in Oriental philosophy was confined mostly to intellectuals and was centered largely on ideas, not on devotional practices. There is no evidence that Emerson ever sat in a full lotus. Today, on the other hand, not only are large numbers of people... involved, but they appear more interested in actual religious practices than in doctrinal ideas. The recent wave of interest in Oriental forms of spirituality seems both broader and deeper than the ones that preceded it.

The emphasis Cox places on the relative novelty of "devotional practices" in the West is evidenced, in general, by devotional gatherings of devotees in many Hindu-based groups, and in particular, by the sophisticated methods employed by Siddha Yoga to bring devotees together. Through satellite technology, it is possible for Gurumayi to hold global *satsang*s (gatherings of enlightened people) of devotees on important occasions, such as the unveiling of the yearly message on January 1. In this way, people across the globe can participate in the event simultaneously in real time. While Gurumayi's guru, Swami Muktananda, maintained that the devotee did not have to be in the presence of the guru to experience *śaktipat*, he did in practice make personal contact, at the South Fallsburg ashram, with each devotee during the summertime Intensive sessions centered around the transmission of *śakti*, as did Gurumayi during the first decade or so of her leadership. After a brief period of absence during the late 1990s, recently Gurumayi has applied satellite technology to the Intensive, so that one can be in the "presence" of the guru even when one is on a different continent. It is through such technology that Siddha Yoga stands out among present-day guru organizations. The significance of the ashrams as places of residential learning is not diminished, however, since the guru broadcasts from an ashram context, and devotees are encouraged to assemble at a Siddha Yoga center to hear the message; in addition, devotees are encouraged to participate in programs held at the ashrams.

The ashram remains the premier setting for *śaktipat*, even when one is viewing a satellite image, because the ashram is a powerful "body" of the guru, a special concentration of her power and presence, as Daniel Gold (1995: 230–250) has discussed. Importantly, the Siddha Yoga path is preeminently residential. Although one can be a day visitor at the ashram, one can go for an afternoon at one of the many smaller Siddha Yoga centers around the world, and even take a Siddha Yoga home course, the weight is on the residential experience, as evidenced by the weekend-long Intensive, by the placement of weeklong programs and courses prior to the Intensives, and by the recent phenomenon of very long-term service (*seva*) retreats at the South Fallsburg ashram. Through the residential experience, serious engagement with the teachings is encouraged through immersion in the way of life at the ashram. This immersion involves personal experience, reflection on personal experience, and articulation of the experience. This participatory mode was heightened by Siddha Yoga in 2004, as one newsletter noted: "Recently at Shree Muktananda Ashram, there has been a change in the way students approach *satsang*s. Now it isn't just the emcee and the speakers who are invited

to prepare for the program—it's everyone. Siddha Yoga students are putting into action the teaching that the Guru is within by learning from and teaching *each other*!"[28]

Students are encouraged to articulate their personal experiences in light of the teachings, and published responses fit securely within this model. The testimonial is the genre most widely applied with respect to devotees in the organization's publications, and it is a prominent feature at Intensives. While this model is distinctive from the scholar's more open-ended methodology of intersubjectivity and dialexis that is advocated in this volume, which results in a publicly rendered account that may (or may not) be at variance with reigning discourses, the personal experiences of the devotees are exploratory. Such experiential explorations *do* leave room for private reflection on both the program at Siddha Yoga as well as reflection on the relationship of one's personal experiences of the teachings to its application in the wider world, both of which are emphasized in the Siddha Yoga ashram experience.

The experience at the South Fallsburg ashram, when it was open to shorter-term retreats prior to 2004, begins with registration, including the payment of fees and the issuing of a photo ID that must be worn at all times at the ashram. The photo ID is encoded with information on what programs one will be attending, and the number of meals one is entitled to at the cafeteria. It is a membership card, however temporary; when I initially called the ashram, I had requested permission to visit the ashram just to see it, and I was gently told that the organization required that I actually be enrolled in a program in order to have access to the ashram campus. Thus, the position of the organization is to encourage anyone who comes to the ashram to engage with the activities there.[29]

There is a daily structure of devotional practice at the ashram. There is early morning chanting, with a session at 3:00 a.m., and then the more popular session at 4:30 a.m., in which the *Guru Gita* is chanted; then breakfast; then a morning session of *seva*, during which one might help clean the ashram or perform outdoor work; noontime chanting at the temple to Bhagavan Nityananda, the first guru in the Siddha Yoga lineage; then afternoon *seva*; and finally dinner, evening chanting, and lights out by 10:00 p.m. There is some flexibility in the schedule; for example, if one is enrolled in an Intensive or in a course, then one would not be able to do all aspects of the daily schedule. Also, within the two main blocks of time dedicated to *seva* one might take some time for solitary contemplation or reading. Other aspects of daily life at the ashram are not flexible: Participants are required

to wear conservative clothing, to eat vegetarian meals, and to refrain from alcohol, tobacco, and sex.

The separation of women and men is a structural component of life at the ashram, and one quite noticeable to a feminist. They are separated in housing[30]; in seating arrangements at chanting sessions, talks by the guru, and Intensives; and in terms of chanting the *Guru Gita*, with women and men chanting alternate verses throughout most of the session. Although I have not heard an explicit justification for such proceedings, they parallel such divisions in aspects of Hindu and Indian tradition.

Some feminists might applaud the separation insofar as it gives women their own space during times of devotion and self-discovery. Other feminists might question the reification of sex and gender implied by such separation, especially at a time when feminists are deconstructing the connection between sex and gender and their presumed meanings in the dominant heterosexual culture.[31] In addition, even within the context of Siddha Yoga teachings there is seeming discontinuity between, on one hand, the teaching that ultimately inner divine nature has no gender and, on the other hand, the emphasis on gender separation in the practices that lead to the realization of inner divine nature.

There is a presumed difference between life at the ashram and life out in the world; the permeability of the latter to the former is the issue. The thesis of the residential experience is that it does permit one continuous, unbroken engagement with the Siddha Yoga path, which is not necessarily possible in the outside world. However, it is also a feature of the residential experience that it demonstrates that one can live day to day in accordance with the Siddha Yoga path, and indeed extending the teachings to ordinary life outside of the ashram is a hallmark of Siddha Yoga, which expresses this desire in terms of its understandings of *seva*; in the guru's yearly message, which devotees are to contemplate throughout the year; in courses on the yearly message, which encourage participants to apply aspects of the message to their lives; and in terms of the Intensive, especially in workshops at the conclusion of the Intensive. This real connection between spirituality and the way one leads one's life, which is most powerfully made through the residential experience, challenges Harvey Cox's (1977: 101–110) view of Eastern spirituality as a form of "escapism," and yet the separation of male and female devotees, as well as the separation of devotees from the wider world on the ashram campus remain.

In an additional contrast to feminism, activities that could be classed as social activism, which are promoted by Siddha Yoga, such

as the Prison Project (bringing the teachings and practices to the U.S. prison population) and PRASAD Project (alleviating conditions of poverty, with the majority of projects in India), are not framed politically although they have significance as political and social criticism. Siddha Yoga's resistance to or rejection of a politicized expression of its social welfare activities returns us to a major distinction between it and feminist praxis, although both movements share a commitment to remaking the world in their image.

Conclusion

One of the aims of this essay has been to emphasize the overlooked commonality of Siddha Yoga, feminism, and the academy on affirming personal experience as a value. For feminist scholarship and activism, the idea that "the personal is political" is a touchstone for theory and practice. Siddha Yoga's frame of reference is its teachings, which generate but also shape and evaluate the personal experience. The academic study of religion today has a much more cautious approach toward "evaluation," partly in response to the once dominant missionary-inflected scholarly discourse that sought to rank religions with Protestant Christianity at the apex of religious development.[32] The strength of the academic methods of intersubjective construction and dialexis, suggested by this volume, is to create a valid space for personal experience within the context of critical inquiry. In the academy, creativity is valued in terms of asking questions, and accuracy is valued in terms of formulating responses, but in neither case is permission relevant to the exchange of ideas. The integrity of the exploration is in the finding of points of connection and points of disagreement, not sameness. When these intersections are identified through the methodology of intersubjective construction and dialexis, which is the work of scholarly knowing and understanding, we have a ground to stand on for taking the next step of determining what we can live with and what we cannot—and saying so.

Notes

1. The role of empathy in the scholarly study of religion is a topic of discussion among scholars. Rita Gross (1996: 10–16) calls empathy "the most radical emotion" and provides a compelling rationale for empathy as a constitutive perspective in the study of religion. For a discussion of other methods in the study of religion, including the postmodern critique of empathy, see Olson, 2006.

2. The phrase "structure of feeling" is from British critic Raymond Williams (1977: 128–135), cited and discussed by Gayatri Spivak (2001: 120–163, 122–123, and passim), e.g., "Williams thought that the way to observe culture where it is in the making is through 'structures of feeling.'" In her article, Spivak applies the phrase to a Hindu way of thinking that is formed by culture, not belief, and suggests the concept of *dvaita* (awareness of two-ness) as a preeminent structure.
3. "Representation" need not be explicitly political, though it carries political implications; see my discussion in Prentiss, 1999: 7–11.
4. Karen McCarthy Brown (1994) characterizes fundamentalism as a response of closure in an attempt to impose control in the face of rapid change: "the varieties of fundamentalism found throughout the world today are extreme responses to the failed promise of Enlightenment rationalism . . . Bitterly disappointed by the politics of rationalized bureaucracies, the limitations of science, and the perversions of industrialization, fundamentalists seek to reject the modern world, while nevertheless holding onto its habits of mind: clarity, certitude, and control." Moreover, this ideology of fundamentalism targets women in particular: "Most of all [fundamentalists] seek to control the fearsome, mute power of flesh. This characteristic ensures that fundamentalism will always involve the control of women, for women generally carry the greater burden of human fleshliness" (175–201, esp. 175–176).
5. My collaborative Affiliate study with the Harvard Pluralism Project focused on New Jersey: "Historical Religions New to the American Context in Northern and Central New Jersey" (http://www.pluralism.org/affiliates/pechilis/index.php). The project on female gurus was separate since the SYDA Yoga Foundation is headquartered in New York State; it developed into an edited volume on Hindu female gurus (Pechilis, 2004). This present essay is a revised version of a paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion in Toronto, November 24, 2002, for a panel on "Hinduism and the Feminine: Reclamations and Reconstructions," chaired by Rita DasGupta Sherma, and it draws in part on one of my articles published in that volume, "Gurumayi, The Play of Śakti and Guru," in Pechilis, 2004: 219–243.
6. Puttick's discussion of female gurus (175-195) concludes with a gendered typology of styles of leadership: masculine or male-identified, feminine, and non-gendered (192), respectively.
7. Some very recent examples of scholarship that both use and challenge feminist issues with respect to South Asian materials include: Biernacki, 2007 (on the issue of agency and subjectivity with respect to textual analysis); Bellamy, 2008 (on the issue of agency and subjectivity with respect to ethnographic analysis); Landesman, 2008 (on male models and the development of female religious paradigms); Pintchman, 2005, esp. chapter 4 (on resonances between Hindu women's meaning-making and feminist perspectives); Pechilis, 2008a (on patterns of

interpretation) and Pechilis, 2008b (challenging the applicability of the oppression-empowerment model).

8. The issue of standards is a major one in the discussion of Western feminism and South Asian cultures. For a current review of the literature, see Anderson, 2008. See also Elizabeth Pritchard, 2000, who provides an important critique of Western feminist images of mobility that unwittingly collude with ideologies and practices of Western colonial development.
9. The strands of tradition informing the meanings of the key philosophical terms *māyā*, *śakti*, and *prakṛti* are lucidly discussed in Pintchman, 1994: esp. 7, 84–115, 131–137, 194–197.
10. "The name of that fiction or *Maya* is the apparent magic of fertility—animate and inanimate. The acknowledgment of this always unitary female power . . . cannot be translated into normative social attitudes toward female human beings. And indeed women cannot feel fertility as the uncanny in quite the same way. For reverence for fiction (*Maya*) as female to be unleashed, the *dvaita* trick must happen, and the female subject exit sociality" (Spivak, 2001: 135).
11. Carol Christ (1997: 97–98) echoes this idea: "In Jungian 'archetypal' psychology, in the 'history' of religion, and in some feminist theologies, the warrior Goddess is identified as an aspect of the 'Dark' Goddess. Warrior Goddesses such as the . . . Hindu Durga and Kali are invoked as images of the 'Dark' Goddess. It is said that these Goddesses allow women to express the full range of our anger at patriarchy, enable us to accept our own death, and may even help us to accept the death of the human species . . . the Hindu Durga exults in the slaying of demons; Kali holds a sword . . . The bloodthirsty warrior Goddesses legitimate warfare and violence, large-scale blood sacrifice, and a dualistic understanding of good and evil." Thanks to Rita Sherma for bringing this to my attention. See McDermott and Kripal, 2003, for a recent discussion of the variety of interpreters of Kālī.
12. More recently discussed in Gross, 1996: 233–235. See also the important revisiting of this question in Hiltebeitel and Erndl, 2000.
13. According to Rita Sherma, "Śiva is understood as *Prakasha* (pure light) in the Tantric ethos, especially in certain major schools of Kashmir Śaivism. The tantric tendency, of course, is to internalize the deities rather than focus on the mythology which is so central to *bhakti* (and so difficult to translate across cultures). Of course, Siddha Yoga affiliates itself implicitly with the legacy of Kashmir Śaivism. Thus, there is a tantric flavor to its hermeneutics. This is significant for a feminist understanding of the movement, as is the different perception of *māyā* itself in Tantra than in, say, Śaṃkarite Advaita" (personal communication, September 14, 2004).
14. From the official Siddha Yoga website, http://www.siddhayoga.org.
15. Both *māyā* and *śakti* are defined on the Siddha Yoga website glossary at http://www.siddhayoga.org/glossary-siddha-yoga.html#.

16. On philosophical and mythological renderings of *śakti*, see Pintchman, 2004. On *śakti* and goddesses in Hinduism, see Hawley and Wulff, 1996; Moon and Benard, 2000; and Brown, 1998. On *śakti* and women in Hinduism, see Narayanan, 1999; Pintchman, 2007; Falk, 2005; Leslie, 1991; and Pearson, 1996. This is not by any means an exhaustive list.
17. See Pechilis, 2004: 219–244.
18. On the association of women saints with bhakti and women religious teachers with *śakti*, see Narayanan, 1999: 25–77; esp. 65. For a discussion of this and other distinctions across various styles of women's leadership in Hindu tradition, see Pechilis, 2004: 3–50.
19. The title "Swami Chidvilasananda" may be translated as "The Bliss of the Play of Pure Consciousness." The guru's more popular title, Gurumayi, can translate as "One Who is Immersed in the Guru," or as "guru-mother": "The name came from an *abhanga*, a devotional song by the Maharashtrian poet-saint Tukadhyada which has the refrain 'Avadali Gurumayi.' In Marathi, *gurumāyi* means 'guru-mother,' although a closely related Sanskrit word, *gurumayi*, means 'one who is filled with the guru'" (Durgananda, 1997: 605, n. 247).
20. Khanna cites McDaniel, 1992: 36.
21. Other female gurus are understood to have been self-enlightened, e.g., Anandamayi Ma and Ammachi.
22. See Hallstrom, 1999: 32, 70, 74, 80, and photographs between pages 106 and 107.
23. For example, Sītā Devī is identified with Lakṣmī; Jayashri Ma is identified with Adya Śakti Kālī; Meera Ma is identified with Adiparaśakti; Ma Jaya Sati Bhagavati is identified as the daughter of Kālī; Karunamayi Ma is identified with Sarasvatī, Bala Tripurasundari, Lalita (Pārvatī), and Lakṣmī; Ammachi is identified with Devī. In addition, Ammachi and Jayashri Ma engage in performances in which they become the Goddess (*devībhava*).
24. See Pechilis, 2004: 219–245.
25. Discussion is on the Siddha Yoga website, Newsletter archives, http://www.siddhayoga.org/news/volume5/index.html. Hear the guru's recitation of the message at http://www.siddhayoga.org/siddha-yoga-message-2004.html.
26. For a discussion of *māyā* in Siddha Yoga teachings, in which *māyā* is a power manifestation of *kuṇḍalinī śakti*, see Brooks and Bailly, 1997: 445–495; esp. 469–473.
27. The messages of the previous four years do not bear the explicit association with gender as the message for 2004 (e.g., 2000 Believe in Love; 2003 Trust); see http://www.siddhayoga.org/teachings/message/message-archive.html. The guru's message for 2008 is: "Search for the knowledge of the Truth and become established in

the awareness of the Self" (http://www.siddhayoga.org/teachings/message/2008/).

28. Siddha Yoga Newsletter, April 2004, at http://www.siddhayoga.org/news/volume7/satsang.html. In a letter dated March 2005, the secretary to the board of trustees of SYDA Foundation informed Siddha Yogis that Shree Muktananda Ashram is open only for long-term retreat participants: "The long-range plan for Shree Muktananda Ashram is to develop the ashram along the lines of Gurudev Siddha Peeth, our mother ashram in India. The goal of this plan is that retreat participants will pursue in-depth Siddha Yoga studies and immerse themselves in following the daily schedule more efficiently and effectively. It will take several years to make the changes necessary to realize this goal. Until then, Shree Muktananda Ashram will continue to function as an ashram solely for long-term retreat participants offering full time *guruseva* and those participating in specific short-term *seva* projects that are paramount to achieving this goal. Over the course of this time, letters such as this one will keep you informed of how the plan for Shree Muktananada Ashram is moving forward." http://www.siddhayoga.org/shree-muktananda-ashram.html, accessed June 2005. A more succinct version of this announcement is now on the website, which dates the decision to 2004 (accessed March 2008).
29. For an important current and critical discussion of Siddha Yoga as a movement and praxis, see Williamson, 2005.
30. There is provision for housing a family together, however.
31. A stream of study influentially forwarded a decade ago in Butler, 1990.
32. See Barbara A. Holdrege's (2000: esp. 84–86) comparative analysis of Judaism and Hinduism as "religions of embodiment" in contrast to Protestant-inflected definitions of religion.

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CHAPTER 6

The Kālī Practice: Revisiting Women's Roles in Tantra

Loriliai Biernacki

Does a woman herself worship the yoni?

—*Pārvatī's question to Śiva,* Yoni Tantra

On the peaks of the holy mountain Mount Kailas, the center of the world, the god Śiva and his wife Pārvatī, the Great Goddess in one of her incarnations, discuss the secrets of tantric practice. In the middle of talking about a tantric rite that involves worshipping a woman, the usually diffident and domesticated goddess Pārvatī asks her husband this curious question about women worshipping. "Should she herself worship the woman or should the male seeker [worship]?" (*Yoni Tantra*, v. 5.23). Śiva replies thus: "The *yoni*,[1] which makes up the whole world—*jaganmayī*—should be worshipped by the male seeker and the *liṅga*, the male organ, should be worshipped by her . . . By the mere worship of these two one becomes liberated while in the body" (vv. 5.23–5.25b). Does a woman participate in worship, or is she only the object of worship? If she does worship, what or whom should she worship? Pārvatī's question here presumes the worship of the *yoni*, that is, the worship of the female embodied as a womb or vulva, as the normative practice. Her question seems to suggest that women and men, as equal actors in tantric ceremonies, would perform the same normative ceremony of worshipping the *yoni*. So she asks if a woman participates in the tantric ceremony the same way that a man does, where she would worship a woman. Śiva replies to the contrary,

and the question disappears. The very question, however, signals that something is awry.

Typically, in Sanskrit tantric *textual* sources, we find that women are the objects of male worship but not worshippers themselves. Hindu tantric texts generally assume a male perspective, male practitioners, and a male audience. In light of this general relegation of women to a passive role, Pārvatī asks an odd, even inconceivable, question. Are women, she asks, actors or agents in the tantric context? In the heady tantric quest for magical powers and enlightenment, do women themselves engage in ritual worship? Or are they merely passive objects, simply used by men in a male-dominated conquest for magical powers and otherworldly states?

Textually, we commonly see women represented in transgressive, "left-handed" tantras preeminently as suppliers of potent fluids, menstrual blood, and conduits for male ecstatic (and enstatic) experience. David White (2003), in particular, compellingly argues for the position that women especially were the suppliers of fluids for "left-handed" tantra. Right-handed tantra employs substitutions or visualizations that symbolically represent the concrete transgressive elements used in "left-handed" tantra. In the "right-handed" traditions, which do not employ liquor, meat, or sexual rites, the woman is usually displaced by the metaphor of feminine imagery. She is an inner principle, the goddess within the (male) practitioner. She is an energy or power, *kuṇḍalinī śakti*, that rises up in the subtle, or energy body in a linear way corresponding to the spine in the physical body of the practitioner to join in ecstatic unity with Śiva (the ultimate Self, and pure consciousness of the practitioner) in the *sahasrāra cakra* slightly above the practitioner's head. One sees the focus on woman as an inner principle in esoteric, inner forms of "right-handed" worship, for instance, in much of the scholarship addressing the corpus of tantric texts written or influenced by the important Kashmir Śaiva tantra theologian Abhinavagupta[2]; in this case, as embodied living females, women are absent.

Pārvatī's question, of course, is a charged one, if only because the tantric proclivity for goddesses has been on some fronts understood as a reclamation of feminine power, and the answer to whether the "Goddess is a feminist," to borrow from the title of an important exploration of this topic, is one that that feminists use today in creating strategies for social change.

This chapter addresses the theme of women as actors in tantra. I suggest that a particular form of tantric practice, the Kālī Practice, presents a textual view of women we do not often see: one

that acknowledges women's capacities for spiritual attainment—acknowledging women as practitioners and as gurus[3]—and recognizes the rights and wishes women may have in the daily business of living life. Working with eight published texts associated with the Kāmākhyā temple and dating to the fifteenth–eighteenth centuries, this chapter demonstrates the presence of an alternative view of women. This Kālī Practice especially proposes a view of women that, I suggest, shifts deeply engrained attitudes toward women to a position that grants women autonomous importance. Pārvatī's question signals this shift. Her question jars us into considering the possibility that women may have actively participated in the tantric rites described here in ways that construed them as peers of men, rather than mere objects, and as having the same religious goals as men. In her question, Pārvatī presumes that since the worship of the *yoni* leads to enlightenment for the male, the same will hold true for the woman. Her question asks us to reconsider how we have understood women's roles.

Śiva's response, in any case, clearly affirms her suggestion that women functioned as actors. So, while women, at least in the texts I will examine, do not seem to perform worship exactly as men do, Śiva, nevertheless, goes on to emphasize the nature of women as active participants. Only when both men *and* women worship their respective opposite genders does the prized attainment of enlightenment while still alive (*jīvan mukti*) occur.

In reading Western scholarly literature on tantra, one usually finds employed two salient arguments that mitigate the tendency to construe tantric traditions as either affording or recognizing the agency of women. The first often runs like this: yes, tantrics venerated the goddess, but this veneration did not actually carry over into veneration of actual living women. In other words, the veneration of a goddess recognizes her capacity to affect events in a practitioner's life; one venerates a goddess precisely because she has the power to make things happen and one seeks to win her favor so that she will choose to use her power to fulfill the desires of the practitioner. While this attitude assumes a sense of power and concomitant agency for the goddess from the standpoint of the believer, this sense of agency typically does not transfer to ordinary women. Neither does it typically transfer to the living woman who temporarily houses this goddess in a state of trance. She may be an incarnate goddess, but unlike the disembodied goddess, the ordinary woman is simply the *object* of veneration, not a subject or agent capable of choosing a particular course of action.

The second argument usually goes like this: yes, women were necessary to tantric rites, but only as vehicles for male attainment. They were conduits of power, vehicles that males used to obtain especially potent magical powers. However, outside the limited sphere of the rite, their importance dwindled.[4] In this view women's own attainment of spiritual power does not actually figure in the image of women.

These views certainly portray accurately a specific body of tantric literature, especially in works produced several centuries earlier and in different locations than the fifteenth- to eighteenth-century texts I focus on here.[5] However, we find even in these earlier texts an alternative view—including, for instance, an acknowledgment of women's special capacity to perfect mantras, and a reassessment of the status of women. This reassessment extends both to ordinary women and beyond the limited time and space of the rite.

It is important to stress that my sources are textual. So, to frame this use of textual sources, we should keep in mind that just as the Kālī of the twenty-first-century West is in some respects an imagined construction proliferating especially through written words on the Internet, so what we address here are texts and, as such, are simply claims by these tantric writers about how one should respond to women. Given that this is the case, it is beyond the purview of the evidence to make claims regarding the actual historical behavior of women or male tantric practitioners. We can only recover a semblance of the "what really happened" through the refractory lens of the text, and we also need to keep in mind that the views presented here only form one element in what is otherwise an unwieldy and often contradictory potpourri of practices and views in these texts.

In conjunction with this lack of other substantive forms of evidence of social practice, I use the terms "subject" and "agency" here not to designate some sort of "real" or existentially autonomous entity, for there are considerable philosophical and cultural problems entailed in assigning these notions to a nonmodern non-Western context. Nor does my use of these terms assume a sovereign, intact self that exists prior to any relation to a world outside itself. I use these terms instead to point to textual portrayals that signify a slippery but rhetorically and grammatically effective and prevalent category. That is, the refractory lens we employ as we read this mediated form of evidence allows us to talk about "subjects" and "agency" if we keep in mind that these are relational terms located within a textual assertion of identities. In this sense the "subject" we describe here is a grammatical instance of a representation of woman. With this I draw from and modify Rajeshwari Sundar Rajan's (1993: 12) suggestion that we

move away from a notion of agency as a "performative intentionality" toward one of functionality within a social network.

Even given these limitations, these textual sources help us to reconstruct indirectly an alternative picture of women, especially since they present such a striking contrast to what we find elsewhere in textual representations of women in Hinduism. So, for instance, we find clear textual references to female gurus (NST 5.70, GST 2.18ff), something not present even in earlier Tantras such as the *Kulacūḍāmaṇi Tantra* (KCT) or the *Kulārṇava Tantra* (KuT), from which some of these eight texts borrow extensively, let alone in a more normative Hindu text such as Manu's *Dharma Śāstra*. This difference, which recognizes living women as venerable, may be read as representing a shift in attitudes toward women as a class. I would suggest that we understand the Kālī Practice as a form of representation whose value perhaps lies most strongly in its historical worth as a reference to the propagation of discourse. These texts reflect the emergence of a *discourse* addressing social relations between the genders, and I suggest that its importance lies in the challenge, as discourse, that it presents to normative classifications. But this essay also strives to propose an intersubjective engagement with these fifteenth- to eighteenth-century texts to see what they might offer us today for rethinking our own categories of gender. For example, for Western women today, Rachel McDermott (1996: 291) notes that "the symbolism of Kālī offers healing in a male-dominated world," a trend that she sees expanded on some fronts via the new Internet culture (2003: 276ff). In a variety of ways this twenty-first-century Western image of Kālī appears constructed out of thin air. Yet this use of Kālī may not be entirely inconsistent with the advocacy of respect toward women that we find in the Kālī Practice. These texts also offer us, in the twenty-first-century West, unexpected ways of looking at gender—for example, the notion discussed later of woman as one of five types of categories instead of two (male and female).

In the rest of the essay, I first look briefly at what comprises the Kālī Practice and at the texts that present the Kālī Practice. Following this, I address the notion of the gender binary and an alternative model present in these texts. I then discuss different elements of the Kālī Practice as well as specific instances where women are represented in venerable positions, as proficient with mantras, and as gurus. Finally I conclude with evidence that suggests the model for understanding the veneration of women in these texts finds a parallel in the veneration of the Brahmin.

The Kālī Practice

This particular form of tantric praxis prescribes "left-handed" tantric rites, including those that focus on women, and is named variously in the texts as the "Kālī Practice" (*Kālī sādhana*), the "Great *Mantra* Practice" (*mahāmantrasādhana*), the "Chinese Way" (*cīnācāra*), and, more rarely, the "Śākta Conduct" (*śāktācāra*). The "Chinese Way" is the most common expression used in these texts. This is not to suggest that this nomenclature in any way indicates actual Chinese practice. This last expression—*cīnācāra*—sometimes translated as the "Tibetan method" (Goudriaan and Gupta, 1981: 153)—looks suspiciously like a species of medieval "Orientalism" where a repressed exoticism and eroticism is, within official discourse in the space of the written text, displaced and projected outward onto someone else, in this case onto the neighboring Chinese. We might find a contemporary example of this, in V. V. Dvivedi's 1978 Sanskrit introduction to the *Śaktisaṅgama Tantra*, where he notes that the description of the "Chinese Way" (*cīnācāra*) approximates Muslim practice. He tells us, in Sanskrit, "here the Chinese bath and bowing resembles the action of *namaz*, [daily practice] following along with the Muslim religion."[6]

For the sake of convenience I will refer to this practice throughout as the Kālī Practice. This nomenclature is preferable to "The Chinese Conduct/Way" or "The Tibetan Way," even though the praxis is most frequently named this in the texts, since so much of Chinese and Tibetan tantric practices do not in the slightest resemble this particular praxis, and it would be confusing and misleading to label this practice with a contemporary national identity. The "Great Mantra Practice" and the "Śākta Conduct" are also not as frequently used to name this praxis as is Kālī Practice, and since the essence of the practice revolves around the worship of primarily three female goddesses—Kālī, the Blue Goddess of Speech, and Tārā—taking this particular name from the texts captures the general impetus of the praxis best.

Five key elements make up the Kālī Practice. I list these here. Due to space constraints, all five are not addressed here, although I do address them elsewhere (Biernacki, 2007).

1. The practice centers on women and stresses seeking out women and treating them with respect.
2. The practice is especially a mental practice; therefore, none of the ordinary rules for time, place, or purity apply.

3. The Kālī Practice is a rite that involves the worship of women, frequently incorporating the rite of sexual union, but at times simply limited to the worship of living women *without* including the rite of sexual union, particularly in the case of the worship of a young girl (*kumārī pūjā*), where sex is not included.
4. The praxis involved in the Kālī Practice explicitly goes beyond the limited time and place of the rite. The attitude of reverence and respect toward women should be maintained constantly, twenty-four hours a day. I suspect this particular rule is especially important in ritually habituating an attitude, which shifts the position of women and the relation to women, in contrast to what we see in an earlier text such as the *Kulārṇava Tantra*, where after the conclusion of the rite, normative hierarchies are reinstated, both with respect to gender and caste.
5. Finally, in the Kālī Practice, the goddess is viewed as embodied in living women. It is not simply that women who are worshipped in the rite are considered divine, but rather that women as a category are revered, whether worshipped individually or not. Further, as a category, women get assimilated to Brahmins. Structurally, this last point in particular is key to the shift these texts present for women.

Sources

The texts consulted for this study include especially the (1) *Bṛhannīla Tantra* (BT), a long text published in 1984 and based in part on an earlier and shorter published version entitled the *Nīla Tantra* (NT)[7]; (2) *Cīnācāra Tantra* (CT); (3) *Gandharva Tantra* (GT); (4) *Gupta Sādhana Tantra* (GST); (5) *Māyā Tantra* (MT); (6) *Nīlasaraswatī Tantra* (NST); (7) *Phetkāriṇī Tantra* (PhT); and (8) *Yoni Tantra* (YT). They are all Sanskrit tantric texts; that is, texts titularly self-identified as Tantras and containing explicitly tantric elements also found in other tantric texts, such as ritual prescriptions, discussion of the six tantric acts,[8] and an emphasis on mantras. They are also generally classified as tantric texts in the extant scholarship (Goudriaan and Gupta, 1981; Kaviraj, 1972). They present an uncommon attitude toward women typically not found elsewhere in classical Hindu texts, such as Manu's *Dharma Śāstra* and Vedic Sanskrit texts,[9] and not common in a variety of other tantric texts either.

These texts also share a number of formal features, suggesting that we understand them in terms of a particular historical movement. They are all from approximately the same historical period and

geographic region.[10] Furthermore, they all include some mention of left-handed tantric practice, that is, the ritual inclusion of the five transgressive substances known as the five "m's,"[11] including liquor and a form of the rite of sexual union. Most of them consider the pilgrimage site of Kāmākhya in Assam to be of preeminent importance. Additionally, one particular verse is replicated across several texts within this genre, but I have not come across the verse elsewhere either in general Hindu sources or in general Śākta sources, such as the *Devī-Māhātmya*,[12] or elsewhere among Hindu tantric sources—and not even in much earlier tantric sources such as the KCT or the KuT, from which some of these eight texts borrow extensively. Given this verse's repetition across several texts, and that many of these texts borrow from older sources, what is probably most interesting is the singular absence of this verse elsewhere among older Hindu tantric sources, and particularly its absence in other "left-handed" tantric texts not from this time period. This verse reads, "Women are gods, women are the life breath," and while the verse is not reproduced in all of the texts consulted here, it nevertheless encapsulates and nearly always accompanies, when it is found, the other elements of the Kālī Practice that we find in these eight texts. Also with some variation, and greater or lesser frequency, the same goddesses keep reappearing. Particularly important are Kālī, Nīlasaraswatī (the Blue Goddess of Speech), and Tārā/Tāriṇī.

One more point of interest is that none of these texts have been translated yet into English, or any other European language, but all of them have been published. Several have been published multiple times; for instance, the *Bṛhannīla* and its earlier version, the *Nīla Tantra*, has been published five times since the 1880s, and the *Gandharva Tantra* four times. That none are manuscripts suggests that at least for an indigenous audience they have been considered important enough to merit space on the printed page—and from a publisher's point of view, an expectation of an audience in India interested in buying these texts, an expectation voiced also in the eminent tantric scholar V. V. Dvivedi's (1996: 1) mention of the popularity (*lokapriyatā*) of several of these texts.[13]

Binaries

The dialogue between Śiva and Pārvatī presented earlier frames gender in terms of a binary. This model probably originally derives from the well-known classical cosmological and philosophical system of Sāṁkhyā, with its notion of male spirit (*puruṣa*) and female matter/

Nature (*prakṛti*). In the model here, male and female are two elements of a binary, and this notion of a binary pervades these texts. However, working against this notion of a binary, we also find inscribed within these texts a separate, different model of the relation of women to men, one that constructs women as comparable to a particular caste. In this case women are not the lesser member of a binary, but rather, one group among several.

In some ways the notion of caste appears to be just as fundamental a division to Indian society as the gender divide. A contemporary anthropologist, Anjali Bagwe (1995: vi), titled a recent book, *Of Woman Caste*, where she draws from current colloquialisms that represent women as a caste group. Apart from this, a designation of women as akin to one of the castes is something we find elsewhere in Sanskrit texts, as early as the Vedas, where we find women lumped in with the lowest of the four castes, the servants (*śūdra*s) (Jamison, 1996: 261). In the earlier, classical representations, the primary division among humans has to do with which caste one belongs to. In this context all women and some men get grouped into this lowest class of persons, the servants. So in terms of ritual praxis, women are not treated as members of the caste to which their (blood) father or male guardian belong, but rather as a whole group they are treated as members of the lowest caste of males.

In contrast, the suggestion we find here instead is that women as a group form a separate caste apart from the lowest servant caste and that this special caste of women ought to be treated more like Brahmins than like *śūdra*s (the lowest ritual, social, and economic group). This grouping does not take into account differences between women, just as it does not take into account differences between Brahmins. In this configuration, women as a class, like Brahmins, warriors, and so forth, possess innate capacities that elevate their status as a whole class. When a text extols women's competence with mantras and advocates respecting them, women here begin to move up, just as, historically, redefining the collective identity of a particular caste subgroup facilitated an upward move along the continuum of the caste system for that group. Again, notably, we find here that in certain respects, the treatment accorded women—as a class—at some places in these texts parallels that of the highest caste, the Brahmin.

From our own view in the twenty-first-century West, perhaps the most salient element of this reconfiguration is that it affords a competing model of gender difference. While it certainly elides the undoubtedly real differences of status and wealth between different women, nevertheless, the presence of an alternative model that

classifies women as one group among several presents an alternative to the nearly universal construction of women as the second sex, the perennially inferior member of a gender binary. So the view here is not like one particularly common and dominant view found in America, where the means of overcoming the gender binary is through an emphasis on the individual. In the American case the individual is of primary significance, and consequently, gender is a contingent and secondary category assigned to the individual, and one capable of being transcended. Indeed, it is frequently argued that we ought to transcend gender as a category in order to achieve the goals of equality. This blanket equality of the individual is a different model than the model of women as one group among several.

Nor is the difference that gender makes in this alternative model like the one postulated in some forms of French feminism,[14] which is still modeled on a duality based on gender essentialism—although, as I note earlier, we also find more commonly a binary model in these texts that encodes an essentialist gender binary. Neither do these texts propose a binary that then also allows space for a third neuter gender, though this is common enough in Indian texts elsewhere. Rather, in this particular alternative model, women are one group among five, which include Brahmins, warriors, merchants, servants, *and* women. The groups are generally hierarchically ordered with Brahmins at the top and servants at the bottom; women in this case form a fifth and are likened to the Brahmins rather than being lumped in with servants.

Social classification often implies a social functionality, and this functionality typically encodes hierarchies of value. Setting women off as one group among several affords a reconsideration of their social functionality, one that in this case shifts their social value as a class. That the classification includes more than three is important because it tends to diffuse relationships away from an oppositional model, something that a number of scholars have noted (e.g., Prokhovnic, 1999).

Both models, the binary one and the one that postulates women as one category among several, operate throughout these texts. A binary model is certainly much more pervasive in general. On the other hand, the presence of a competing model helps to circumvent the familiar and inherently problematic dialectic of the binary, which unfolds as center/margin, self/other (male/female, mind/body, and so forth). The writers of these texts do not try to integrate these two different models. No authorial voice notices the disjunction between these separate models. They coexist without comment.

On the other hand, an alternative model of women as one of five groups offers ways of thinking about gender that a view of two precludes. It offers a view that by its contrast may shed light on our own twenty-first-century understandings of gender. While this Indian model appears to still incorporate an essentialist model of women, which does not account for differences between women, nevertheless it does offer a move away from an idea of gender as a binary, which in turn affords a structural problematization of the idea of woman as the other of maleness.

A binary insinuates a structural pattern where normative (male) identity is established through the exclusion of what is not normative, that is, through the exclusion of female as a category. This entails definitionally a devaluation of the non-normative "other"; this devaluation is what founds the possibility of a valued normative identity. In other words, implicit in the structure of a binary is the notion that the two categories are opposed, and one of the two usually predominates. Further, implicitly the dominant category defines itself by what it is not, by what it excludes. This is one of the lessons Hegel so profusely iterated—that a binary implicitly incorporates an agonistic relationship. A multiplicity, on the other hand, diffuses the intensity of opposition (unless all the "others" are grouped again together, just as we see that the classical Hindu tradition affiliates women and *śūdra*s together). It may be that the stipulation of women as one class among a multiplicity (i.e., they are comparable to Brahmins, but not identified with them) contributes to their greater valuation as a class of persons in these texts.

The Key: Women Are Gods

The Kālī Practice centers around women, both the worship of women and worship with women. Thus, the GT tells us:

> Together with a woman, there [he should] reflect [on the mantra or practice]; the two of them together in this way [they do] worship. Without a woman, the practitioner cannot perfect [the *mantra*] at all. He should mentally evoke [the mantra] together with a woman and together with her, he should offer into the sacrificial fire as well. Without her the practitioner cannot perfect [the *mantra*] at all. Women are gods; women are the life-breath. (GT 35.54–GT 35.56)

The GST asserts, "Together with the woman, one should recite the mantra. One should not recite the mantra alone" (5.11). That the

practitioner performs the practice with women—and here it appears women are doing the same things as men, contemplating the deity, saying the mantra, and making offerings into the fire—means that women play an indispensable role in the practice.

Further, we should also note that the attitude of reverence toward women is inculcated outside the rite of sexual union as well and also toward all women, even women with whom one has no relations:

> Having bowed down to a little girl, to an intoxicated young woman, or to an old woman, to a beautiful woman of the clan (*kula*), or to a contemptible, vile woman, or to a greatly wicked woman, one should contemplate the fact that these [women] do not appreciate being criticized or hit; they do not appreciate dishonesty or that which is disagreeable. Consequently, in every way possible one should not behave this way towards them.[15]

In this way the BT establishes a respectful attitude toward women, and in this context not just toward desirable woman with whom the male aspirant might perform the rite of sexual union, but toward all women, including a woman who is "*kutsitā*," vile and contemptible, and whom one does not worship or engage in the rite of sexual union with. At this point the BT iterates, "Women are gods, women are the life-breath" (6.75).

Now when does this contemplation happen? This bowing and this contemplation is what one does on a morning walk (BT 6.69–6.72, NST 11.116–11.122).[16] The practitioner gets up in the morning and bows to the special tree of the clan. This particular bowing does not involve a mental visualization as does the next thing he does in the morning, which is to visualize the guru. Hence, if we reconstruct his morning, he walks outside to the "clan tree" and then visualizes the guru and contemplates his main personal mantra. He then bows to the women in the quote given earlier and then reflects upon the fact that these women do not appreciate being lied to or hit, as we saw earlier. This part of the Kālī Practice is also not connected with the performance of the rite of sexual union but is rather part of habitual morning contemplation.

The worship gets extended further, even to the females of other species, of birds and animals: "The females of beasts of birds and of humans—these being worshipped, one's ineffective, incomplete deeds always become full of merit."[17] Such a move encodes and highlights females as a separate class. It also makes it clear that the rite of worship does not necessarily entail the rite of sexual union.

One more point of interest, as the MT notes, is that the rite of sexual union that the Kālī Practice prescribes is different from the infamous *cakra pūjā*, the rite probably best known in the West as the "depraved" tantric "orgy," where a group of men and women perform a ritual that includes feasting and sexual rites. The MT first describes the rite of sexual union connected with the Kālī Practice. After the author finishes this description, the author of MT continues on to say, "Now, I am going to tell you a different practice. Pay close attention. One should worship a woman who is the wife of another (*parakīyā*) in the circle (*cakra*), and after this, [he should worship] his own beloved deity" (11.17). The "*cakra*" or circle worship involves the wife of someone else chosen among the partners in the circle. This "circle" rite, which was simultaneously sensationalized and presented as a scandal, informed much of what was imagined in the West about tantra (Dubois, 1906: 286; Bharati, 1975). For our purposes here, the scandal attached to the *cakra pūjā* is not important, but rather that the spatial organization of these two rites differ fundamentally and as a result, the rhetorical effects of the rites, the "messages" they give, also differ.

In the *cakra pūjā*, participants are arranged in a circle, and a centrally located altar instantiates the goddess. The goddess is invoked for the rite, usually into a pot of water, which is worshipped as temporarily housing her. So she is present in the rite, but present as separate from the participants, including the women participants. In the version of the *cakra pūjā* that we find in the earlier KuT, in a carnivalesque fashion, the women are made to drink as the men pour liquor into their mouths (KuT 8.70); general drunkenness ensues. The "yogis dance, carrying pots of liquor on their heads" (8.71b). Then, "the yogis, drunk with wine fall down intoxicated on their chests; and the yoginīs of the group, intoxicated, fall on top of the men. They mutually engage in the happy fulfillment of pleasure" (8.73–8.74).

In contrast, in the Kālī Practice there is not a group of women. Moreover, in the Kālī Practice the woman is at the center of the rite, both spatially and ideologically. In this case, the living woman *is* the goddess, not considered separate from the goddess. She herself is considered and worshipped as the goddess instantiated. And aside from the woman, only the person worshipping her is present.[18] Spatially she, not the image of the goddess, takes the center, the place of importance, and ideologically she is the center because she is the goddess. The ritual and spatial encoding of the two rites send different messages with respect to the status of ordinary women. In the *cakra pūjā*, the woman is not particularly venerable and one can see how, for such

a rite, it would be easy to view women as necessary tools during the course of the rite, who would then be unimportant after its conclusion. The rite described in the BT (6.20ff), on the other hand, inculcates a more psychologically durable reverence for the living woman who is worshipped.[19] What is also important to recognize with this is that the practice of the rite of sexual union was by no means monolithic in its performance or function. Here, even one of our medieval sources points out that the rite had more than one version.

How Is She a Goddess?

Now a question arises: If the woman is worshipped as the goddess, exactly how is she the goddess? Does she get possessed by the goddess in the course of the rite? We might venture this point, and elsewhere, apart from this particular Kālī Practice, such is likely the case. Interestingly, however, here the texts are explicit about precisely not viewing the woman as a medium for the goddess: "And there [in this rite] one does *not* do the invocation of the goddess" (CT 3.16).[20] This suggests that it is as a woman in her ordinary, nonaltered state—not when she is speaking in tongues, nor when some special external divinity empowers her, but that as herself—she is divine. The difference between a rite that features a woman as a medium, possessed by the goddess, and a rite that considers an ordinary woman herself to be divine is salient. If she is possessed, then this state is temporary and ultimately, not hers, not her own subjectivity. Here, however, the point is to see a normal, nonpossessed woman as divine.

In this context, the practice of constantly viewing women as goddesses starts to make sense. If a woman is the goddess only at a specific time, if only during the rite is she a medium for the goddess, then only at that time would it be necessary to treat her with the reverence due to a deity. There would be no need to maintain this attitude beyond the confines of the rite. On the other hand, if the divinity, which is the goddess, is intrinsic to her being, something she carries around with her all the time, something she *is*, then her status, in general, shifts. Then one would need to be vigilant, constantly maintaining an attitude of listening to her to make sure that the goddess standing before one will be pleased and therefore benevolent. It is precisely the act of looking to her, as ordinary woman, that affords a shift in the normative discourse between the genders and that allows for a recognition of her as a subject, as a person to whom one *should* listen.

This practice of listening to her is key. It doesn't matter how many other spiritual practices one does, because, as the MT says, "one's worship is in vain, one's *mantra* recitation is useless, the hymns one recites are in vain, the fire ceremonies with gifts to priests; all these are in vain if one does that which is offensive to a woman" (11.34).

In addition the texts direct the practitioner to respect the rights of the bodies and minds of women. So as we saw earlier with the BT we also see elsewhere in other texts that the practitioner "should not hit women or criticize women or lie to women or do that which women find offensive" (CT 2.24).[21] The GT and NST advise, "never should one strike a woman, with an attitude of arrogance, not even with a flower" (GT 35.8a).[22] Even further, the BT tells us, "Not even mentally should one harm a woman" (BT 6.300).[23] Even if the practitioner feels that a woman has hurt him, or has violated his rights, the response should never be to harm her: "Even if she has committed an extreme offense, one should not have hatred for her. One should never hate women; rather one should worship women" (BT 7.111; also NST 16.7).

Now, according respect to women is not done out of a sense of superiority, as in the practice of chivalrous behavior toward women that accepts their offenses without striking back because women are the "weaker" sex. Rather, one avoids harming a woman for the same reason one doesn't harm a powerful yogin or a sage like the cranky Durvāsas: she has power, and she might get offended; then one had better be wary of her curse. So the NST tells us, "When a woman gets angry, then I [Śiva], who am the leader of the pack, always get angry. When she [a woman] is upset or afflicted, the goddess who gives curses is always upset" (16.11b–16-12a). So if a woman is offended, she brings the ire of both the god Śiva and an unnamed curse-giving goddess on to the offender.

This shift in attitude is crucial, precisely because it sees women not as weaker but as stronger. A woman has power, power that, in itself, entails the prerogatives both of subjectivity and social clout. The disempowered may not have a voice, and the refinement of civilization commends the strong for taking pity upon the disempowered. A chivalraic discourse, especially one easily recognized in the West, recommends treating women mildly for just this reason. On the other hand, here we have a different matter. In this case it is an emotion different from pity; it is fear and reverence that drives one to accept the offenses she may give.

Women and Their Mantras

Perhaps what's most important here, however, is the way that this power is coded. The MT tells us, "A woman who is engaged in practicing the Durgā *mantra* is able to increase well-being and prosperity, however if she gets angry at a man then she can destroy his wealth and life" (11.33). What is central here is that the source of her power is her spiritual practice, the fact of her repetition of the Durgā mantra (*durgāmantraratā*). Like the yogin, and like the Brahmin, she has a power in her due to her spiritual attainment, and her anger carries an edge. Just as the curse of the peevish Brahmin sage Durvāsas sticks, so also her anger will stick, whether one deserves the curse or not.

We see here an instance where women have power that is not connected to their sexuality or to their capacity to be faithful to their husbands. These two types of feminine power are ubiquitous in South Asia, and one can see these two as part of a continuum. That is, a woman has a dangerous power in her sexuality, which, if tamed into a faithfulness toward her husband, for example, Kannagi (Holmstrom, 1980), and notably also for the *satī*,[24] can become a potent force for cursing, even for burning down a whole city. But here we have something quite different. That is, contrary to the normative coding of a woman as a sexual being who is dangerous because of her sexuality, here we have a perilous leap into a world where a woman is dangerous because, like the Brahmin priest, like the guru, and like the yogin, she knows how to wield a mantra.

We also find that women as a class have a special ability to master mantras effortlessly. The BT tells us,

> The restrictions that men contend with [in the practice of] *mantras* are not at all there for women. Anything whatsoever, by whichever [means], and moreover in all ways [is attained], for women magical attainment (*siddhi*) occurs, without any doubt...for a woman, by merely contemplating [the mantra] she in this way becomes a giver of boons. Therefore one should make every effort to initiate a woman in one's own family. (BT 7.188)

The GT iterates this as well: "She doesn't have to do worship (*pūjā*), or meditate, or purify herself with a bath; just by merely thinking of a *mantra* women quickly get the power to give boons" (35b–36a). We discuss this more later in the context of women's initiation; here we can note that it is her gender, her status as a woman, that entails this power, yet not her sexuality. Rather more like the Brahmin, who has a tendency to tell the truth simply because he is born into the Brahmin

caste, as we see in the Upaniṣadic story of Satyakāma Jābala,[25] so also a woman, because of her status as woman, naturally can perfect a mantra. Similarly, persons by fate born into the caste of warriors have the capacity to endure pain, as we see in the well-known story of Karṇa with his guru Paraśurāma, who realizes that he is of the warrior caste despite his claim otherwise, because he can endure pain. Similarly, simply being born a woman affords this facility with mantras (Biernacki, 2007).

I have noted elsewhere that we find women in these texts accorded the roles of guru and practitioner (Biernacki, 2007). Here I will suggest that it is not just that women figure as gurus; they also figure all the way down, suggesting that not just exceptional women were accorded respect, but ordinary women as well. We find references to women initiates and to women as practitioners along with references to the exceptional facility with mantras that women as a class possess. So, we find that "one should make every effort possible to initiate the women of one's clan, one's family (*kula*)" (BT 7.198).[26] Indeed, this act of initiating women is a great blessing for the family, and it will affect future generations: "Whoever does this auspicious act [of initiating women]—in this lineage are born men equal to Bṛhaspati. There is no doubt about this. This is the truth, this is the truth, O Goddess" (BT 7.199b). Bṛhaspati is the guru of the gods and noted for his learning and eloquence. So it is interesting that initiating a woman will not bring sons who will become emperors or great warriors but rather sons who will be learned.

The Key Again: Women Are Gods

Earlier I mentioned a particular signature half-verse that is repeated across several texts and that signals a rescripting of the view of women. "Women are gods; women are the life-breath" the verse proclaims.[27] Since women are gods, it makes sense to both honor women and to construct an ethic in relation to them whereby one does not offend them—in other words, to treat a woman as one treats a god. And indeed we find that this innate and divine power that women have is profound. Women are, after all, like gods, since as the GST tells us, "Women are the source of the world, women are the source of everything, O Goddess" (1.9a). With this statement the GST assimilates women as a class to the level of creator deity, which may partially help to explain their apotheosis into divinity. The innate and divine power women possess is so great, in fact, that in the *Blue Goddess of Speech Tantra* (NST) and the MT women head the list of gods and godlike

figures to whom one owes allegiance, even displacing the great gods Śiva and Viṣṇu.

Thus we see that the NST advises one to sooner abandon one's mother and father and even one's guru, rather than to insult one's female partner (16.12b–16.14a). This advice, in fact, precisely inverts the common Hindi proverb that Gloria Raheja (Raheja and Gold, 1994: 121) gives us: "Whoever kicks [i.e., offends] his mother and father to strengthen his relationship with his wife, his sin will not go away even if he wanders through all the pilgrimage places [where sins are said to be removed]." Similarly, in the NST, Śiva says:

> Better to abandon Brahmā, Śambhu and Hari, better that I (Bhairava) myself be abandoned, than that one should insult one's beloved (fem.). One's worship is in vain, one's *mantra* recitation is useless, the hymns one recites are in vain, the fire ceremonies with gifts to priests; all these are in vain if one does that which is offensive to a woman (16.12b-16.14a).

If one insults a woman, then all one's spiritual endeavors are useless. In this instance one can imagine this injunction playing out on the domestic front—a husband all wrapped up in his spiritual quest, worshipping the gods while his wife tries to get him to take care of her and the family's needs [the husband protagonist in Deepa Mehta's *Fire* (1998) comes to mind]. In our scenario here, this wife would have a scriptural injunction to back her case. Śiva, however, goes further than this; he continues, "It is better to die than to do that which is offensive to a woman" (16.15).

The MT offers the same advice as the NST, and then goes even further. This text asserts that one should give up one's life rather than insult a woman. Moreover, the male gods and even the goddess are relegated to a secondary position: "Better even that one should abandon the Goddess (*Devī*); but one should not in any way abandon one's own beloved female partner" (11.36b). The MT also supplies the rationale for prioritizing one's female partner: "Not the creator, not Viṣṇu, not Śiva, not the beautiful Goddess, not the primeval eternal Goddess—none of these [gods or goddesses] will be able to protect the person who does that which is offensive to women" (11.37f). So women are accorded this respect because intrinsically they are gods (*striyo devāḥ*). However, it is rather curious that the texts all use the masculine word "god" (*deva*). That is, women are gods and not goddesses. Elsewhere in these texts in profusion, women are assimilated to goddesses. For instance, Śiva says to the Goddess, women are "in

their essence, you" (GT 35.8: *tvatsvarūpiṇī*) using the feminine form. Why are they here in the Kālī Practice indicated by the masculine term "god"?[28]

I'm going to suggest that the use of the masculine here is a linguistic marker referencing another class of gods, and that as a class of gods, women resemble this other class of living, breathing gods. That is, the status that we find for women in these texts in many respects parallels the *bhū-deva*, the "earth-gods," that is, Brahmins, that class of humans who are like gods, but walk the face of the earth.

My assertion is corroborated in other ways. For example, the GST applies the same procedure of feeding Brahmins for the attainment of religious merit to women: "Earlier the rules were given that one should feed a Brahmin according to one's ability. In the same way one should feed a woman" (5.9bf). Women are like Brahmins, and just as feeding a Brahmin brings merit, so does feeding a woman. Similarly, the BT also tells us that worshipping a woman brings results equal to that which one gains by giving a learned Brahmin a field rich with grain (6.7f). Elsewhere, in a list where we might expect to find Brahmins listed, women take their place. The CT says "one should make great efforts and with devotion worship the guru, goddess, *sādhus* (itinerant practitioners), women, and the immortal self" (5.7). It would not have been at all against normative expectations to find Brahmins in this fourth position slot; instead here we find the category "women." Again, the GST describes for each of the four castes the state of beatitude one can expect from the repetition of the mantra associated with the five m's.[29] Here, the Brahmin is absorbed into the supreme self; the warrior caste (*kṣatriya*) gets to dwell with the Supreme Goddess eternally; the merchant attains the same form as the supreme Goddess (*svarūpa*); the servant caste (*śūdra*) gets to live in the same general world as the Goddess (*saloka*). The text then includes women as a fifth caste that gets absorbed into the body of the Goddess (GST 7.15ff).[30] Just as we find in normative Hinduism that serving Brahmins, these earth-walking gods, leads a person to salvation, so also all "beings reach salvation by serving women" (CT 4.23b; 2.44-Adhika Pātha). Earlier I noted a verse from the GST that assimilates women as a class to the creator god. In fact, this is precisely what we find with Brahmins who get linguistically and otherwise assimilated to the creator god Brahmā.

This class action reverence is not at all like the respect accorded to the guru or the yogin. In the case of the guru especially, most tantric texts, including these, are eminently cognizant of the existence of both good and false gurus, and they take no pains to supply

us with lists of the qualities we might expect to see in both. Gurus are individuals and individually merit worship and respect. Not so in the case of Brahmins and women. Just as Brahmins as a class are categorically offered respect, so these texts enjoin this sort of class-based respect toward women. We should keep in mind here how radically this diverges from normative Hindu tradition where women as a caste are mostly grouped with, or place on a par with, the lowest of the four castes, the *śūdra*s (Smith, 1991: 18).[31] Likewise, women's facility with mantras extends to members of the class as a whole and not specifically to particular women.

What does this class action reverence mean for women? It affords a way to shift the status women have in the social sphere. For our own purposes, what's interesting about this potential shift is precisely that it does not rely on a version of gender founded on a duality. This non-binary model, I suspect, is part of what's key in the reconfiguring of women's roles. It may be that, as Kristeva and Lacan argue, insofar as we construct our sense of self out of an element that must be extruded outside and alienated as "other" to our selves—and as an other that has historically taken the form of woman, as both Lacan and Kristeva note (Lacan, 1998: 6, 11, 73; Kristeva, 1982)—this "other," as a perpetually alienated "other," then becomes and remains intrinsic to the stability of self. That is, we can't rid of the "other" without destabilizing our sense of self. This indeed presents a formidable psychological barrier to seeing women as equal, to releasing them from the category of "other." On the other hand, the model that these texts presents offers one possible way out of the impasse we find with the binary self/other (echoed in the binary of man/woman). The very multiplicity of the terms destabilizes the system. This may offer possibilities for rethinking gender outside a dualist hierarchy.

Notes

1. The word "yoni" here may refer to the woman or it may refer to the female sex organ, though in this case, the reply appears to suggest that it refers to the latter.
2. See, e.g., Muller-Ortega, 1989.
3. See also Dimock, 1989: 215–216.
4. See White, 2003; Bharati, 1965: 304ff; and Davidson, 2002: 92ff, especially 97. See also Humes, 2000.
5. These views differ from some contemporary anthropological research (i.e., Humes, 2000; and Caldwell, 1999).
6. I give here also Dvivedi's (1978: 42) original Sanskrit for this quote since this is such a striking claim he makes: "*ityatra varṇitau*

cīnasnānanamaskārau islāmadharmānuyāyināṁ vaju-namaj-karmaṇī anuharataḥ."

7. This text is edited by Rasik Mohan Chattopadhyaya in *Tantrasāra*, a text to which I did not have access.
8. These are the *ṣaṭkarman*, a term referring to the sixfold division of goals in Tantric praxis.
9. See especially Jamison, 1991 and 1996; Patton, 2002; and Smith, 1991.
10. The *Gandharva Tantra* differs from the other sources in that it strongly affiliates itself with the Śrī Vidyā tradition and has less association with the Northeastern region. I discuss the dating of these texts elsewhere (Biernacki, 2007).
11. The "5 m's"—each of the words in Sanskrit begins with the letter "m"—include meat (*māṁsa*), fish (*matsya*), liquor (*madya*), parched grain (*mudra*), and sexual intercourse (*maithuna*).
12. Notably many of these texts reference the *Devī-Māhātmya* and some, such as the *Māyā Tantra* 3.12–3.20, directly quote the *Devī-Māhātmya*. However, nearly all of these texts date much later, to probably not earlier than the sixteenth century, suggesting a late date for this signature verse. I discuss the dating and location elsewhere (Biernacki, 2007). The *Gandharva* and *Phetkāriṇī Tantra* are both cited in Brahmānanda Giri's *Śāktānandataraṅgiṇī*, suggesting an earlier date for these two texts, especially for the *Gandharva Tantra* that Brahmānanda Giri cites extensively.
13. The *Cīnācāra Tantra* presents an exception, since there is a German translation of it. Also, I heard of a popular nonscholarly English translation of the *Cīnācāra Tantra*, but was not able to track it down.
14. See especially Irigaray, 1985.
15. BT 6.74–75: NT p.28, ln.14, also BT 6.300, NST11.120–11.121, CT 2.23, MT 11.38.
16. See Biernacki, 2007: 40–41, for the Sanskrit version and translation of this passage.
17. BT 6.301–6.302. See also BT 6.57.
18. Optionally, the guru may be present, and it appears the guru was probably a necessary presence when the couple first began performing the rite. See YT 1.19.
19. I discuss this durable reverence in detail in Biernacki, 2007.
20. Again at YT 1.16. The Sanskrit for CT 3.16 is: *tatra cāvahanaṁ nāsti.* The line in the YT is identical (shifting slightly in the next portion of the verse).
21. *tāsāṁ prahāro nindāñcā kauṭilyamapriyantathā || sarvathā ca na kartavyam |*; CT 2.24, NST 11.121, NT p.28, ln.14, BT 8.91 as well as BT 6.74, GT 35.9, NT p.9, PhT 11.17, for no hatred toward women and GST 5.17–5.20, cautioning the practitioner to worship and feed women, and if one out of anger or delusion neglects to worship women, the practice is useless.

22. *kadācid darparūpeṇa puṣpeṇāpi na tāḍayet*|, NST 16.7: *śatāparādhasaṁyuktāṁ puṣpeṇāpi na tāḍayet.* As I discuss in Biernacki, 2007, this line in the NST, though not that in the GT, is lifted from KuT 11.95.
23. The line here continues, "Especially not the women who are his."
24. See especially Lindsay Harlan's (1996) interesting discussion of the cursing power of the *satī*.
25. *Chāndogya Upaniṣad* 4.4.3ff, translated in Olivelle, 1998.
26. Also GT 36.2. See also NST 14.50.
27. CT 2.25, NST 11.122, NST 16.6, GT 35.56, BT 6.75b, BT 8.90.
28. We should also note here that the text uses the term "god," rather than the feminine abstractive *devatā*, which tends to carry a diminished importance in relation to the term *deva*. In this context, see also Weinberger-Thomas, 1999: 172, for a contemporary instance of a woman, in this case, the *satī*, designated with the male term *dev* (the Hindi version of the Sanskrit) rather than the female form *devī*.
29. The *pañcatattva* in these texts usually refers to the five m's discussed earlier. However, it may also refer to the five elements or five principles of the cosmos.
30. This reading comes from two manuscripts the editors titled "k" and "ṅ" Recension "g" also lists women as a fifth group, though here they do not get absorbed in the body of the Goddess. The editors printed an alternative version that lists the fifth category as "army generals" (apparently the "kha" manuscript). Now as far as the logic of categories go, it seems rather far-fetched to list the four well-known castes and then as a fifth add the category of "army generals"—given that three of the five manuscripts give the fifth category as women. This editorial decision likely reflects an uneasiness on the part of this text's editors and one of this text's redactors to the more symmetrical idea of women as constituting a fifth caste. Also, "army generals" as a category is generally subsumed under the warrior caste. Finally, given that what the fifth caste obtains, absorption into the body of the Goddess (*devīdehe pralīyate*), it appears rather more likely that women would attain this state than would army generals.
31. We should note also GST 11.13 where women are still conceived of as a group like the four castes; however here, rather than being treated more like Brahmins, they again get lumped together with *śūdra*s, as prohibited from pronouncing the syllable "Om."

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PART III

The Feminine Principle in Hindu Thought and Practice: Problems and Possibilities

PART III

The Feminine Principle in Human Thought and Practice: Problems and Possibilities

CHAPTER 7

Hindu Rituals on Behalf of Women: Notes on First Principles

Laurie L. Patton

In recent research I came across a young woman who told me how she recited the Rāma-rakṣa, or "protection of Rāma" mantra, during childbirth. I was struck by the integration of Sanskrit, and this small ritual, into her everyday life. Her Hindu world, and her performance of Sanskrit, included the labor and delivery room in a major city in India. While this was not a properly "Vedic" ritual, it was still modeled on the *gāyatrī mantra* and understood by many as Vedic. The baby was a girl, welcomed by all in the family. When I discussed this practice with another colleague, also a woman Sanskritist, I further commented that Sanskrit seemed to be a language of the heart as well as the head. She replied, "It is *artha* that matters—one's goal in life and in ritual. Everything should be subject to *artha*, and analyzed accordingly."

I was struck by the comment as a kind of practical philosophy—a sense of how one might best organize a life, both in terms of the appropriate mantra recitation as well as the appropriate rituals to follow as one confronts the stages of life. One might view my friend's comment even as a kind of metapractical philosophy—an inquiry into why rituals work the way they do (see Kasulis, 1992). In other words, in my colleague's view, the mantra became part of the larger goals of safe childbirth and flourishing of life. The following is a small meditation on the possibility of *artha* and the hierarchy of knowledge (*pramāṇa*, or "direct knowledge"; *anumāna*, or "inferential knowledge"; *smṛti*,

or "remembered knowledge"; and *sadācara*, or "customary practice") in traditional Indian philosophy for present-day feminist purposes. By feminist purposes, I mean very simply thinking philosophically with the concerns of women in mind, such as safe childbirth and the prevention of female infanticide. These ideas will be the focus of the rest of this essay.

Recently, at the end of an article on the various usages of words and rites for miscarriage, stillbirth, and abortion (Patton, 2002: 51–69),[1] I suggested the possibility of using basic *pramāṇa* sources, such as Veda itself, as mantras to restore and protect women's health. Within a Mīmāṃsā worldview, we might well argue for a continued form of ritual action performed for the health of women in contemporary India, not unlike the Rāma-rakṣa *stotra* with which I began this essay.

This task is, if we do it well, neither an attempt to legitimize ancient myths in order to valorize the current situation for women in India nor an attempt to raid ancient myths for equally problematic feminist purposes. We might instead be feminist Mīmāṃsakas, or traditional interpreters of Vedic ritual. Mary McGee (2002: 32–51)[2] has discussed the ways in which particular arguments of Jaimini might be useful for contemporary women. Here, I argue that certain formal perspectives and knowledge from the Mīmāṃsā and other Indian philosophical traditions could also be of great use.

As I have argued previously (Patton, 2002: 53–63), our method might be to focus on the power of metaphor in the very kinds of Vedic texts that I have laid before you. Our modus operandi might be fourfold: first, following Mark Johnson's work *Moral Imagination* (1993), we assume that ancient texts can provide us with both metaphors and narratives, which Johnson argues are the stuff of more informed and complex ethical thinking. Second, we assume that this idea of ethical thought is the Sanskrit equivalent of *pramāṇa*, or right reasoning, of traditional Vedic interpretive philosophy. Third, an inquiry into *strīdharma*, or the codes of conduct by and about the lives of women, is a legitimate and necessary form of inquiry that should be the appropriate topic of Mīmāṃsā. Fourth and finally, because *pramāṇa* can and does outrank *sadācara*, or traditional practice, as a form of reasoning about Vedic texts, reinterpretation of Vedic texts can and should provide a critique of *sadācara*, or contemporary traditional practices, such as female infanticide in present-day India. In other words, basing our arguments on these four principles, we might use Vedic texts to provide a sophisticated, traditional argument against religious practices concerning abortion, or indeed, any

other practices that harm women. I am arguing, in effect, that the reasoning of *pramāṇa* can and should be understood in ethical as well as "logical" ways.

Mīmāṃsā

Let us begin with what we might mean by Mīmāṃsā philosophy. As I have written elsewhere (Patton, 1996), and as is known in Hindu philosophy more generally, Mīmāṃsā's core *sūtras* are those of Jaimini, who is credited with systematizing Vedic knowledge to a point of transcendental elegance. They are known commonly as the *Pūrva Mīmāmsā Sūtras* (PMS). The text's central problem is the investigation of *dharma*, or duty, as it is stated within the Vedas. Because the Vedas are the main source of dharma, they have no author, but are eternally valid and uncreated—as Sheldon Pollock (1989: 608) puts it, an "always-already-given discourse."[3] Most importantly, dharma is taught by Vedic injunction (*codanā*)—that which is laid down in the Vedas as "to-be-done" within the ritual sphere. All of Vedic language is organized according to this basic principle. Mīmāṃsā, then, is Vedic ritual philosophy based on an inquiry into dharma (*dharmajijñāsā:* PMS 1.1.1).

Mīmāṃsā divides the Vedic literature into four different categories—*mantra*, *brāhmaṇa*, *arthavāda*, and *nāmadheya*. Though an extended discussion of these distinctions need not detain us here, some important points should be noted. For Mīmāṃsā thinkers, the most important distinction is between *mantra* and *brāhmaṇa*. *Mantra*s are those texts that merely make an assertion (PMS 2.1.32) but are not themselves injunctive. They function only during the performance of an act. The *brāhmaṇa* texts have been defined as all that which is not *mantra* (PMS 2.1.33). While arguments abound as to how the *brāhmaṇa*, which contains "all the rest," is to be divided up, what remains clear is that, whatever else they contain, *brāhmaṇa*s do contain injunctions that are indicative of dharma. The *brāhmaṇa* portion of a text is where injunctions are primarily to be located. The third category, *arthavāda*, consists of those *brāhmaṇa* texts that are not injunctive in character, but are purely descriptive or declamatory. They commend the act of sacrifice to a deity, or describe the reason for performing a certain act. The final division, *nāmadheya*, consists of those texts primarily made up of the proper names of sacrifices and other things, and whose meaning depends upon the knowledge of those names. (See Biderman, 1984; and Gosvami, 1986, for helpful elaborations on these ideas.)

For Mīmāṃsā, the deities are a purely hypothetical entity, posited for the sake of the sacrifice, which would not be an act of "sacrifice" unless there was a deity to whom the offering is made (PMS 9.1.6–10). Yet even with this proviso, Mīmāṃsā deities are clearly subordinate—they have no physical body, they are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied, nor do they reward and punish people as the results of sacrifices (see Jha, 1942: 317; and Clooney, 1988a: 277–98).

Artha as a Basic Category for Social Thinking on Behalf of Women

In his 1989 article, "Mīmāṃsā and the Problem of History in Traditional India," mentioned earlier, Sheldon Pollock discusses the suppression of historical consciousness in India via the claims of the religio-philosophical school of Mīmāṃsā[4] about the transcendental nature of the Vedas. According to the PMS, the status of the Vedas as *apauruṣeyatva* texts—texts "existing beyond the human"—is proven by two basic strategies. The Vedas are transcendent because they have no beginning in time and no author; those men whose names are associated with particular recensions (such as Paippalādaka) are simply scholars specializing in the transmission of the Vedas (PMS 1.1.29–30). Moreover, according to Mīmāṃsā, the Vedas have no historical contents. All those references that are suggestive of historical contents are, via the strategy of word-derivation, proven to be merely phonemic resemblances to the names of historical persons (PMS 1.1.31).[5]

In light of this important analysis, one might infer that, in its lacking historical consciousness, and its focus primarily on ritual categories, Mīmāṃsā is of little help for purposes of social reform, which would demand a knowledge of how things are practiced outside of ritual as well as how social conditions have changed over time. However, in my own thinking (also following Bilimoria[6]), Mīmāṃsā is quite helpful for purposes of social critique. Its flexibility about the nature of *artha* allows us to rethink purposes in such a way that we can engage in ritual performances (such as the Rāma-rakṣa *stotra* cited earlier) that help change injustice or work effectively for the betterment of those who need justice. Most significantly, it goes without saying that Mīmāṃsā must be undertaken in tandem with serious moral reflection about the nature of contemporary *dharma*. But surely the phrase at the very beginning of the Jaimini *sūtras*, *dharmajijñāsā*, "wanting to know *dharma*," suggests just that. *Dharmajijñāsā* does not imply a Vedic sacrificial worldview that is frozen in time or ritually oriented

for the sake only of ritual orientation. While the Vedic worldview entirely encompasses Mīmāṃsā and is co-extensive with it, Mīmāṃsā is also concerned with what Francis Clooney (1990: 139) calls "the underlying pattern of word-purpose-action upon which every ritual rests: *dharma* includes *codanā*, a verbal power instigating certain kinds of action." Thus, Mīmāṃsā might also be interpreted as a call for constant and continuous reflection on dharma and therefore a redefining of *artha* according to purposeful action, even justice, based on contemporary issues.

Let us delve further into the nature of *artha*. As Francis Clooney also argues (1986: 205), dharma is defined as *codanālaksano'rthaḥ* (1.1.2)—"*dharma* is that purpose which is characterized by injunction or injunctive force." *Codanā* is thus a command, driven and made coherent by a purpose that impels the sacrificial performer into action. Clooney translates *artha* here as purpose, but he also joins other scholars in understanding it as meaning "goal," "wealth," "object," and so forth. The dharma discovered everywhere in the performance and in the relationship of all its elements is identified with what is purposeful (ibid.).

Clooney goes on to outline the three key compounds used in the Jaimini Sūtras—*puruṣa-artha* (or *puruṣārtha*), *kratu-artha* (or *kratvārtha*), and *śabda-artha* (or *śabdārtha*). *Puruṣa-artha* is self-interest for something of benefit to human beings, even and including renunciation (PMS 4.1.3–6). The three kinds of sacrificial action (permanent obligation, occasional obligation, and optional undertaking) can be measured with an idea toward the results. Even those actions with no stated results are presumed to be focused on heaven (PMS 4.3.11). What is more, the idea of "heaven" could also be that state of happiness that all human beings desire (Clooney 1986: 205–206). For our purposes, such *puruṣa-artha*s might well include women giving birth, women in need of protection from violence, and so on. *Kratu-artha* is the internal cohesion of the sacrifice, the internal cohesion of the sacrificer's implements and the sacrificer's actions, regardless of what his or her purpose actually is. For example, a concern with *kratu-artha* might be focused on the presence of unnecessary implements or *mantra*s when a sacrificial rule is being "transferred" from one rite to another.

The third form of *artha* is *śabda-artha*—the meaningfulness of Vedic words, particularly explained in the ninth *adhyāya* of the PMS. In PMS 1.2.31–53, we see a long discussion of this issue. How does Ṛg Vedic *mantra* fit within this larger scheme? Does this Mīmāṃsā system mean that *mantra*s, being merely assertive statements, are useless, or even "meaningless," as Staal (1979) has argued, given the

centrality of injunction? On the contrary, as Ganganatha Jha (1942: 162) notes, if the *mantra* texts were meaningless, they could not convey any information regarding dhårma, and this would vitiate the authority of the Veda.

To argue this point, in *Sūtra*s 1.2.31–53, Jaimini picks up the skeleton of the arguments provided by the ancient etymologist Yāska against Kautsa, an early proponent of "meaninglessness," and develops them in more elaborate detail.

For Mīmāṃsā, *mantra*s serve two purposes—the purpose of *asserting* things in connection with the acts enjoined by injunctive texts, and the purpose of *recalling* such injunctions to mind. Thus, meaningful *mantra*s are clearly helpful in providing knowledge of *dharma*. As Clooney (1986: 207) also states, the *śabda-artha* is not a detached meaningfulness, but rather a sacrificial purposefulness.

The discussion of *artha* can be extended to grammatical terminology as well. Peter Scharf (1995: 66–67) discusses the early grammarians' idea of intention (*vivakṣa*) in relationship to *artha* in an intriguing and helpful way. He refers to Subramania Iyer's (1945) helpful observation that, "for the grammarian, '*artha*' does not mean the external reality but whatever the word brings to the mind . . . It is the intention of the speaker which calls up particular words for use." Words are, therefore, looked upon as the effects of that intention (assuming that the speaker's intention is not simply individual whim, but grounded in a speech community).

Thus, both the basic meaningfulness of the sacrifice and the basic purposefulness of action are established through the idea of *artha*. Moreover, the basic universality of *artha*, understood as both the meaning of individual words and purposefulness of the sacrifice overall, is crucial to our argument. There are many reasons why one would want to undertake a sacrifice, and these are stated at length in the *Jaimini Sūtra*s. As Clooney (1986) also argues, Mīmāṃsā constructs *artha* so that there is an over-arching *yajñārtha*, or purpose of ritual itself. In this way, the impetus of the sacrifice subordinates the *śabdārtha* of the Veda, the *kratvartha* of particular ritual activities, and the *puruṣārtha* of the performer himself. "Every element of the ritual whole, including the performers, the deities and the results, are secondary or accessory to the overall project of action" (208).

As we shall discuss more extensively later, this perspective can and should be, and indeed has been, open to women's practice. Jaimini 6.1.14 states explicitly that because they, too, desire results, and are thus connected with the purpose of sacrificing, women are eligible to be sacrificers, in addition to owning property. Like all beings, they

are desirous of results (6.1.20)—not understood in a utilitarian fashion, but in the sense of human flourishing (Clooney, 1990: 141–42).[7] Thus, the idea of *artha* is intimately connected with women's capacity as ritual actors.

These goals are differently stated in the Śrauta Sūtras and the Gṛhya Sūtras, the public and domestic manuals discussing the overall procedures of seasonal, royal, and household sacrifices. However, as I will discuss later, there are indeed *puruṣārthas* that could be understood to be in favor of promoting women's health and the welfare of women overall. Such rites tend to be found in the later literature, such as the Gṛhya Sūtras and the Vidhāna literature—for the safe birth of a child, rites against domestic disharmony, rites against a rival who has been cruel, rites against illness, and even rites for the *yajamāni*, the wife of the sponsor of the sacrifice, in the *rajasūya* and other more public rituals.[8] The situations of today may not be the Vedic versions of those same situations, in which women's roles in society were differently configured than they are now. But if wanting to inquire into the nature of dharma is as strongly based a force as the Mīmāṃsā tradition would like to claim for it, then those situations are as relevant and important to address today as they were then.

Vedic Words as *Pramāṇa* Helpful to Women's Health: Some Case Studies

In order to think through feminist Mīmāṃsaka ideas, I thought it worth taking several case studies and looking at them differently than they have been looked at in the past. I begin with the most difficult case, RV 5.78, a hymn used for successful childbirth, which also contains a blatant wish for a boy-child in its final verse. How might this hymn, difficult as it is, be used as a resource for women?

In my earlier interpretations of this hymn (Patton, 2002: 57–59), I have focused on the hermeneutics of suspicion. The hymn 5.78 was just one hymn among many I examined in an earlier study on the history of usage of Vedic hymns about birth and the changing attitudes toward the embryo over time. I argued that we see a movement from the concrete, maternal meaning (wherein the embryo is referred to as part of the mother, and therefore something that the mother might lose) to a symbolic and paternal one (wherein the embryo is a kind of storehouse for sacrificial knowledge, and therefore something that the father might waste or even murder).[9]

RV 5.78 is a hymn to the *ṛṣi* Saptavadhri and focuses on his story. In the earlier Vedic ritual texts, it is not used for any specific purpose,

and yet it is used in the later Vedic text of the Vidhāna in a very specific manner. It reads as follows:

1. Aśvins, rich in food, find pleasure in my offering as you wish; fly like two geese upon the Soma juice.
2. Just as Atri, escaping from the fire, propitiates you like a solicitous wife, therefore come with the speed of a falcon, bringing happiness.
3. Open yourself up, o tree, like the womb of the woman in labor. Hear, you Aśvins my cry and free Saptavadhri.
4. For the anxious *ṛṣi* Saptavadhri, who is in misery, through magic you Aśvins climb the tree up and down.
5. Like the wind moves the lotus pond all around, so may your embryo stir; may it emerge ten months old.
6. Like the wind, the forest, and the sea moves, like this may your ten-month child be released along with the afterbirth.
7. After the boy has lain in the mother for ten months, may he emerge from the living woman alive, unharmed, alive.[10]

The story of Saptavadhri is contained in several commentarial texts. The background given by commentators to this hymn is as follows:

> Having committed seven failures in a childless marriage, the king Aśvamedha of the race of Bharata employed the *ṛṣi* Saptavadhri—presumably to beget a son upon his queen. On his eighth failure, the king, throwing him into the trough of a tree [and] into an abyss, restrained the *ṛṣi*, described as "the one who had shed his seed at night." The *ṛṣi* praised the Lords of Light with the hymn RV 5.78. The Aśvins, having raised him from that [abyss], made him fruitful again. The commentary states that the triplet in the hymn that refer to the embryo (RV 5.78.7–9) is for the purpose of an embryo for himself—as the commentary says, because the *ṛṣi* slept like an embryo in the tree. But commentators also say that the earlier two Vedic verses, 5 and 6, referring to the tree opening itself to free Saptavadhri, are to be known as belonging to the Aśvins. These verses are also seen as a *mantra* for embryos that miscarry. (BD 5.82–87)[11]

In addition to this small story about the fate of the *ṛṣi* Saptavadhri, RV 5.78 is also used ritually. Specifically, in the late Vedic text the *Ṛg Vidhāna*, certain hymns are used in a rite to prevent *garbhaśrava*, or the flowing forth of an embryo. The *Vidhāna* tells us that many Ṛgvedic hymns should be employed for the same purpose: RV

1.1.62, a hymn to the demoness Amīvā; RV 5.78, the hymn to the *ṛṣi* Saptavadhri, who was childless; and RV 1.101,[12] the hymn to Indra to drive away the "outsider" people of Kṛṣnagarbhā.

As I stated in my earlier article, the *Ṛg Vidhāna* is not simply a text that focuses on difficulty in childbirth but also one that contains instructions for which Ṛgvedic *mantra* is appropriate in which situation. The Ṛgvedic *mantra* is usually a single verse dedicated to a particular deity, with a particular purpose in mind—agricultural prosperity, long life, material wealth, sons, and the like. So the *Ṛg Vidhāna* describes a difficult situation—getting lost in the woods, the sudden flight of an unwanted pigeon into one's kitchen, the theft of cows from a rival, the bickering of cowives—and tells us which *mantra* to recite from the ancient text to solve the problem. Thus, the historical assessment of this hymn might go in the following manner: Hymn RV 5.78 and its related story of Saptavadhri explicitly address the anxiety provoked by the continuation of the male line, combined with the ways in which the birth can be invoked as proceeding smoothly. Thus, just as Saptavadhri himself escaped from the tree, so, too, must the embryo stir in an uncomplicated emergence from the mother. Moreover, the Ṛgvedic hymn explicitly compares the birth process, the bending of the tree together and apart, with the process of the composition of sacred formulas, which allow the stirring to occur. Finally, the commentarial tradition about the hymn compares Saptavadhri to an embryo—"he who slept like an embryo" in the tree where he had been thrown. Therefore, as others have also noted, the escape of the *ṛṣi* and the birth of the child are straightforwardly homologized in this hymn. In addition, some attention must be paid to the fact that Atri is mentioned as a paradigmatic figure in this Ṛgvedic hymn. Atri is in both the ritual and mythical texts the very symbol of a failed birth and second birth.[13]

In sum, RV 5.78's use in the later Ṛgvidhānic rite for the prevention of miscarriage implies several different perspectives on a miscarrying woman. First, the birth of any child could potentially be the birth of a great Brahmin sage, like Saptavadhri or Atri. Second, the way out of a potentially failing birth is to invoke a successful second birth, as is recounted in the various tales of Atri and is clearly the case in the story of Saptavadhri. The second birth may not be through a natural womb but rather through a womb substitute, such as that of a pot, or an earth cleft, or a tree trough. The Ṛgvedic *mantra*s imaginatively "start the birth again" as the miscarriage is occurring.

An Alternative Interpretation for Women

The Basic Argument for Puruṣārtha

In light of the purposes of this essay, however, the interpretive history I outline in the earlier essay and earlier in this essay does not have to be the *only* interpretive history. We can also move from historical-descriptive to normative arguments, and I intend to do so in the next section of this essay. Vedic arguments about interpretation and pluralism of schools was clearly alive in the fifth century BCE, when Yāska fought his battles with Kautsa and also named several other interpretive schools of the Veda. So too, Vedic interpretive arguments were continued on with Mīmāṃsaka schools such as Prabhākara and Kumārila. It is entirely within Vaidika tradition to argue about the proper form of recitation and sacrifice.[14] Thus, using the principle of the feminist Mīmāṃsaka discussed earlier, there is no reason not to continue to offer alternative perspectives now on behalf of women. If Vedic canon is truly relevant, it must be relevant even today—not because it has a cure for cancer or proof of space travel, but because it contains human truths about the nature of action and how we can flourish better.

First, and most importantly, this idea can be articulated in terms of the Mīmāṃsā principle that a *puruṣārtha* can and must include women and women's welfare. We know from JMS 6.1.6, mentioned earlier, that when the male gender is referred to as a universal, and there is no other possible distinction about gender being made, then the implication of the sentence is all people, and not just men. Since both men and women desire heaven, they have the *adhikāra* to sacrifice. So, too, *Kātyāyana Śrauta Sūtra* (1.2.5–6) supports this view. In JMS 6.1.8, the masculine gender is inclusive of the feminine, and Śabara also supports this position. In this passage, then, a class is referred to without any distinctions (*jātyarthasyāviśeṣatvāt*); thus, women are included (*strīyāpi pratiyeta*).

Mary McGee (2002) also notes that Patāñjali himself argued that grammar in the sacrifice might be changed on the basis of gender, because "*mantra*s are not given in cases to suit every gender and context, and one needs to know how and when to modify the *mantra* accordingly."[15] Most significantly, this idea is helpful not only with respect to the issue of whether women can sacrifice, but also in defining the overall idea of a *puruṣārtha*. Based on the grammatical and ritual arguments presented earlier, a *puruṣārtha* can therefore include concerns specific to half the human race of women. It might also be relevant here to make the painfully obvious observation that many of the common *puruṣārtha*s, such as long life or the birth of

an offspring, are best fulfilled when there are women who are strong and able to perform these tasks as well as men. Sacrifices on behalf of the well-being of women, then, should be understood as comprising a basic and straightforward *puruṣārtha*.[16]

Use of Metaphors

With this foundational point in mind, let us begin with our first principle of interpretation mentioned at the beginning of this essay—focusing on key metaphors as forms of ethical thought. We might note that, in this hymn, birth and the natural process of the opening of a tree trunk are homologized. In other words, in the recitation of the hymn even during the birth process, each image could be understood as directly related to a part of the body: the healing deities, the Aśvins are asked in the earlier verses to speed as quickly as possible to the site of the birth, the woman's body, for healing purposes. They should be like geese (v.4) and like falcons (v.5). In addition, natural images of movement, such as the wind on the lotus pond (v.7) and the sea, the forest, and the wind stirring (v.8), are also a metaphor for the stirring or birth of the child.

In addition, one could also argue that there are conversely related metaphors, both of which valorize the birth process: the key metaphor for Saptavadhri is a woman giving birth, and so too the key metaphor for a woman giving birth is a *ṛṣi* emerging from an opening tree. In both directions of metaphoric application, the notion of freedom of movement, and therefore freedom from constriction, is the key to a successful birth. Indeed, it might be argued that Saptavadhri needs the image of a birthing woman to help him.

In this application of the hymn then, we might think of it as similar to the South American Cuna birth ritual about which Levi-Strauss (1967: 181–207) writes.[17] That ritual was, he argues, remarkably effective because it identified each part of the woman's body with a mythical person and a mythical event. In this way, the Cuna ritual allowed the mother to identify the birth process with something larger than herself, and work toward a solution of the birth that had cosmic, and not just personal, meaning. The same could be said of the powerful metaphors within 5.78; although there are not specific identifications of body parts with mythical personages, the larger process of birth is indeed identified with something larger than the woman herself. The wind, sea, and forest have movements similar to that of the birth of the child, and so, too, does the wind on the lotus pond. And there are Artharvavedic hymns with similar wording (such as 1.11) as well

as the Ṛgvedic ones, mentioned earlier, that could also be used for this purpose.

The Argument of Pramāṇa *as Superior to* Arthavāda *and* Sadācara *in Ritual Action*

Let us turn now to the question of the actual words of the Vedic hymn as *pramāṇa*, or authoritative statements, articulated as an interpretive principle earlier. What is intriguing about this hymn and others for our present purposes is that it actually contains *codanā*, or a statement with injunctive force, in verses 7, 8, and 9. The *codanā* is that the child may be born alive (*niraitu jīvo*), and therefore fits with the Mīmāṃsic definition of dharmic injunction. So, it is dharma of the highest kind—not just an *arthavāda*, or descriptive verse that supports injunction, but a statement about what *ought to* happen, what action *ought to* occur. What is even more important is that, in verse 9, the woman too is described as living (*jīvantiyā*). The child needs to be born from a living woman. Thus, with the *puruṣārtha* of women's health in mind, RV 5.78.8 could be explicitly used to protect a woman giving birth and safeguard her well-being.

But what about the *problem* of verse 9, where the child being "born alive" is clearly a boy (*kumāraḥ*)? There are several approaches to dealing with this difficult aspect of the hymn and other hymns using similar language.[18] Our first obligation would be to think about the nondharmic application of Veda, and find a way to prevent it. It would be entirely reasonable that the use of this hymn in practices of preference for boy children that result in harm to women (such as female infanticide) would be considered adharmic from the perspective of the Śāstras. This is what Swami Narayanan himself argued; he reminded people that the killing of a child and the killing of a close relative are prohibited in the Śāstras. But would this generally *śāstric* argument be a strong enough argument according to Mīmāṃsā? Probably not.

Our approach might also be based on our second interpretive principle, stated earlier, that ethical thought on behalf of women and the hierarchies of traditional Vedic interpretive philosophy could be engaged here. Thus, as Jaimini 1.4–23 argues at length, only the direct knowledge of, and words of, the Veda have primacy of place in cognition. Other forms of knowledge, such as inference (*anumāna*), presumptive reasoning, and sensory knowledge (*pratyakṣam*) are not as reliable as sources of knowledge about dharma. This would include *sadācara*, or tradition knowledge, mentioned in the Laws of Manu

and other Śāstras (also see *Ślokavārtika* 2.21–156; 3.1, for elaborations on these arguments). Later Mīmāṃsā commentators also go on to extend the argument that *smṛtis* in direct contradiction with the Veda cannot be accepted as trustworthy.[19] Thus, we can also argue against female infanticide and other practices that harm women on the basis that the *codanā* for life, and for a living mother, is far stronger than many of the statements regarding preferences for boys.

In other words, such statements are also stronger than any "practice" of female infanticide, which is only mentioned as *sadācara*, or "traditional practice." Vedic injunctions, in the optative, imperative, and strong subjunctives are more powerful than the passing phrase: "Some people do this." Many of the earliest references that could be used to support such practices are clearly stated in terms of a practice and not an injunction. Indeed, it is quite clear that these references constitute a statement of *sadācara*, what has been done, rather than *pramāṇa*, what should be done, and thus describe a lesser form of knowledge. One example from the *Taittirīya Saṃhitā* clearly has this tone of describing regular practice, rather than urging or impelling one to action: *"Tasmāt strīyam jatam parasyanti ut pumaṃsam haranti"* ("Hence they reject a female child when born, and take up a male"; *Taittirīya Sāṃhitā* 6.5.10.3). What is more, not only would this statement be understood as describing only a "common practice," but its form would also be understood as only an *arthavāda*. Thus, while the words are meaningful, they are only supportive of sacrifice (*arthavāda*), and not as powerful as *codanā* itself. This idea is understood from Jaimini's view that there is a weakness in sacrificial procedure if it is "not expressive of injunctive force" (*acodanā*).

The Argument of Kratvārtha *in Ritual Action*

However, there is an even stronger argument to be made, because there are passages for the preferences of boys over girls that *do* have injunctive force. *Atharva Veda* 6.11.3, for example, reads: "Prajāpati, Anumati, Sinīvālī, have made it thus: may he put elsewhere a woman birth; may he put here a male." Moreover, this passage is used in the *Kauṣītaki Śrauta Sūtra* (35.8) for the conception of a male child, where fire is generated between two trees, and is also given to the woman wanting a child.

How might we come to terms with such phrasing, or the use in a hypothetical *agniṣṭoma* of a *mantra* that might harm women? One argument is the overall cohesion of the rite—something very

important in Mīmāṃsā. *Atharva Veda* 6.11.3 is clearly making a distinction between boys and girls, and thus could not be understood as generic, as we could see in other cases presented earlier. But this does not mean that the force of the injunctive statement is a norm for all people, and all times and all sacrifices and sacrificers. Indeed, one might argue that in the case of rites for what would be for the conception of girl children (attested to in *Āśvalāyana Gṛhya Sūtra*), that it would not be used at all.

Moreover, and even more importantly, in rites that included a concern about human flourishing, or long life, or the safe birth of a child of either gender, such a *mantra* would not be appropriate at all. It would not be in accordance with the unity of word and purpose, or the unity of action (JMS 11.1.6) within the sacrifice. As Jaimini writes in 11.1.1, while the acts might be distinct, they are, and should always be understood as, related to a single motivation (*prayojanāsambandhāt*); thus they should be regarded as a single action.[20] This idea is related to an argument also made by the later Mīmāṃsaka thinker Kumārila that even in cases where the words might be taken to denote different things, one meaning should be decided upon, and that meaning should have direct relevance to the ritual action and the harmony between the word, act, and intentions of the sacrificer (*Ślokavārtika* 16.1–30).

This idea is also related to the idea of *kratvārtha*, or the overall coherence in which no "extra" pieces are missing. In a rite in which the *puruṣārtha* is understood to include both men and women, any use of *codanā* that directly contradicts the *puruṣārtha* would go against the integration and coherence of the rite itself and would be considered either contradictory or extraneous as such.[21] The principle of *bhavanā* requires harmony of the means, the process, and the result of the sacrifice.

Finally, we might also use as a further example the later Mīmāṃsic discussion about the Śyena sacrifice, which enjoins animal slaughter (2.235–78).[22] Here, Kumārila argues that the process itself is not adharmic, since it is enjoined in a Vedic injunction, but the result, which is pain to the animal, might clearly be understood as adharmic. His conclusion is that the Śyena sacrifice should be considered neither dharmic nor adharmic. More importantly, it certainly could not fulfill the idea of *bhavanā*, since there is not harmony between the means, the process, and the result of sacrifice. Any sacrifice undertaken for the health of offspring that *also* involves harm to women (such as the killing of girl children) could also be analyzed in exactly the same way.

The Argument of Precedent

What is more, there are clearly precedents for these kinds of rituals focused on girls and women in authoritative Vedic texts such as the Vidhānas, mentioned earlier, and the Gṛhya Sūtras. *Mantra*s enjoined in places such as the Gṛyha Sūtras focus on rites for girl children as well as boy children. As I have written elsewhere, in the *Āśvalāyana Gṛhya Sūtra* (AGS), major coming-of-age ceremonies include girls (the naming ceremony [1.13.12], the feeding ceremony [1.16.6], and the tonsure ceremony [1.17]). While *mantra*s are not recited for girls in these contexts, girls are still understood as ritual agents. They have a life cycle, they enter into different phases of being, and they are not simply "patients" with no agency.

Moreover, in many other rituals (such as the ritual involving the discernment of character in a marriage), the woman's agency involves ritual participation, including active offering of grains. And indeed, there can be active recitation of *mantra*s, such as in the AGS marriage rite. Finally, AGS understands older women whose husband and children are alive as ritually authoritative because they are the ritual hosts of new brides and the ones who know procedures in the hair-parting ceremony (1.14.8; 7.1.10–22).

Āśvalāyana Gṛhya Sūtra 1.7.4–6 also entails a rite for a man who wants only girl children or only boy children. In the marriage ceremony, if he wants only male children, he should grasp his bride's thumb. If he wants only female children, he should grasp her whole hand (*aṅgulireva strīkāmaḥ*). This passage constitutes a significant piece of evidence that the desire for female children was part of a Vedic worldview and had a sanctioned rite to go along with it.

The Argument of Ritual Transfer

Indeed, many rites could be conducted on the basis of the Mīmāṃsic principle of *vidhi*. While *codanā*, or injunction, is the injunctive force of a statement per se, the *vidhi* is the specific conduct of that specific rite. As PMS 10.1.1, 4.2.30, and 7.3.1 suggest, the *vidhi* can be transposed from rite to rite. This is the nature of ritual embeddedness about which Frits Staal and Jan Gonda have written so eloquently.[23] As JMS 7.17 argues, *vidhi* may not be completely established in an original context of a rite, but it can be actualized based on an authorizing injunction in later cases. This rule establishes the diversity of sacrifices (*codanāyāṃ pravṛttiḥ*). Thus, rites can have a prototype, such as the *agniṣṭoma*; this kind of prototypical action is called the *prakṛti*, and the variation, or ectype, is called the *vikṛti*. In our case,

then, we might have an *agniṣṭoma* on behalf of women's health, with the injunctions of 5.78 used in precisely the ways we suggest earlier. What is more, as Patāñjali and Pāṇini have also argued, a *mantra*'s gender might be changed or understood in accordance with the purpose of the rite. Madhav Deshpande (1996) also notes this practice in contemporary American Hindu temples.[24]

Let me summarize the position at this point: Among the diversity of sacrifices sanctioned by tradition could be included many different sacrifices offered on behalf of women, girls, unborn and recently born girl children, according to the injunctions of 5.78: that the mother be living and that the child should be born alive. This injunction has more powerful force than the references in Veda that could be used to harm women in any way, which could be understood as either *arthavāda* or *sadācara*. Moreover, Mīmāṃsā is very clear that the sacrificial action, and neither the deity, nor the material of the sacrifice itself, is the crucial motivator for modifications and overall design of the rite (9.1.1; 9.1.3; 9.1.15).[25] Thus, if the *artha* is clearly established as being for the flourishing of women, then modifications of the rite would be allowed. And grammatical variations in the *mantra*s within the sacrifice on behalf of women are clearly allowed by both ritual sources and grammatical ones.

Relevance for Today

In this essay, I have made some basic suggestions for how we might reconstruct a Mīmāṃsā view of ritual on behalf of women. Practices that harm women constitute an extreme fulfillment of an anti-woman ideology that can be found both in the Vedas and the *śāstra*s. However, there are plenty of pramāṇic injunctions to argue against such practices and ideologies, and these should be taken up.

In the final analysis, one also wants to inquire why this would be a relevant endeavor at all for women today. And there are several answers to this question. First, in some parts of India such as Maharashtra, women are increasingly part of the ritual scene in India, even the Vedic ritual scene. Although they may not perform priestly rituals, women Vedic scholars are advisors and knowledgeable observers in Vedic sacrificial performances. And, as several recent scholars have noted, revival of the sacrifice is becoming quite popular in these same parts. As one prominent Sanskritist put it, "It has become a big business."[26] Thus, the question of relevance for women will become inevitable. More and more decisions will need to be made as to the participation of women in certain ritual situations. It is important for

these kinds of attempts to be made early. There are several relevant principles mentioned in this essay, such as *vidhi*, *prakṛti*, and *vikṛti*, that could be of real use when applied in details.

Second, there are, alas, several "rites" currently performed for female infanticide today that do not have Vedic injunction of any kind. These include the "feeding of milk" to the baby, which is actually drowning the baby in a pot or a vat of milk. They also involve the feeding of a grain husk that could slit the throat of a small baby, or the mixing of food with "medicine" that is actually an overdose. All of these rites are given names that make it seem as if the work is innocuous and even dharmic. It is a very straightforward and helpful case to argue, as we have in this essay, that according to the principles of orthodox Vedic ritual thinking, these rites are not authoritative in any way, and go against dharma. Indeed, the arguments presented here could be even more effective because Vedic injunctions are so crucial to Vedic worldview and have never been condemned as heterodox such as the Buddhist arguments were.[27]

Third, and perhaps most significantly, we could take full advantage of the indeterminacy and flexibility of *artha*, so that sacrifice can work together with ethical thought grounded in the dignity of the person. Some ethnographic work on contemporary Vaidika communities, such as that of David Knipe,[28] suggests that the contemporary idea of a "moral person" is not incompatible with a traditional Vedic worldview. What is more, such a view might include even the development of new forms of *artha* such as the one we suggest earlier. Indeed, in one conversation with a traditional Mīmāṃsaka in 1999, on the way back from a *soma* sacrifice in Nanded, Maharashtra, I asked him this particular question about women, and whether sacrifices on their behalf could be made. He answered very much in the affirmative.

Fourth, and perhaps most importantly, recent work of women's groups, particularly in South India, in trying to work against practices that harm women has shown that the more women can use traditional ideas to help with their arguments, the better off they are. They argue that cultural change and argumentation need to go hand in hand with legal change. Such cultural shifts would include the use of traditional Hindu philosophy, mythology, and so on.[29] Indeed, women's groups report that prenatal care, in which the woman's body and the child's body are both understood to be inherently valuable, have significant effect in reducing the practice of female infanticide. The girl child that is born is understood to be inherently valuable, and can be imagined as valuable in future society.[30] Thus, my argument

in an earlier article would be relevant here: there are some early Vedic hymns that could be read as identifying the womb with the woman in whom it resides rather than as the property of the male Brahmin line. But more importantly for the purposes of this essay, the emphasis on the living mother and child found in RV 5.78 and AV 1.11 could be utilized in precisely this manner.

Let us be very clear what we are arguing here: Are we saying that the early Mīmāṃsakas were feminists? Of course not. Are we saying that women were freer in early India? Not at all. Are we saying that Mīmāṃsā is a more moral philosophy than other forms of Indian philosophy? Not in the least. Are we arguing that such rituals can replace allopathic and homeopathic health care for women? Absolutely not.

What we are arguing is that, given the preponderance of Hindu rituals being performed today, we can marshal the flexibility of traditional ritual philosophy, in tandem with a discussion about women's health and the dignity of a person, to create *ritual alliances* with health care on behalf of women and girl children. Even if we espoused (and I do not) a radical mind-body dualism such that such ritual alliances may be beneficial only to the mind of the woman or the social fabric of a village, and not to their actual "bodies," or to their actual "public health" epidemiological statistics, such ritual alliances are still worthwhile forms of persuasion. If *homa*-offerings can be performed on behalf of peace, as was done at the Hindu Temple of Atlanta after 9/11, then surely such basic rituals for women's health can also be part of a contemporary ritual repertoire conducive to the public good. We return, then, to the women reciting Rāma-rakṣa mantras in the delivery room of the hospital. Perhaps she knows something very important about ritual alliances and the health of women and can act as a resource for us in the future.

Notes

1. This chapter was written in the spirit of rereading ancient Indian texts with a more sophisticated feminist hermeneutic than has previously been applied to early India. I am grateful to Tracy Pintchman, Francis Clooney, Donald Davies, Rita Sherma, Gyan Pandey, Shalom Goldman, and Joyce Flueckiger for their comments on this piece.
2. Among other important contributions of this article, McGee argues that the contemporary understanding of ancient India needs a basic reminder of the fact that Jaimini did indeed allow women to sacrifice.
3. See also Clooney, 1988a: 659–684, for a larger discussion of this issue in terms of authorship of the Veda.

4. Shlomo Biderman (1984) has made an argument that the claims of Mīmāṃsā should be taken seriously from a philosophical as well as a religious basis. As Pollock does also, I am assuming such philosophical value from the start. (See ibid., 73–81).
5. See Pollock, 1989: 608ff, for a full discussion of these proofs of transcendence in Śabara, Kumārila, and other commentators.
6. In addition to Bilimoria, 2001, also relevant is Bilimoria's "Who is 'The Subaltern' in the Comparative Philosophy of Religion?"
7. Also see McGee, 2002, which we will discuss more extensively later.
8. I will be discussing these at length later in the essay, but for now, see Patton, 2004.
9. Jamison also provides a detailed discussion of the mythic imagery of failed birth, abortion, and miscarriage in early India. Although her main focus is the Svarbhanu myth, whereby the sun is wounded by Svarbhanu, she also discusses the ways in which the healing of the sun, and its brightening, is compared to a birth process, whereby the caul, or covering, of the embryo is progressively stripped away from the newborn. [*Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* (JB) 1.80; 3.3.34.5; 4.3.4.21; *Maitrāyaṇī Saṃhitā* 1.65; *Kāṭhaka Saṃhitā* (KS) 11.5–12.13; 8.5]. Moreover, Jamison connects anxiety about the birth of the sun with the motif of the failed birth of the sun. In one myth in the *Pancāviṃśa Brāhmaṇa* (PB; 4.5.9–12; KS 12.6, 13.6; TB 1.2.4.2), the gods feared the "falling down" of Āditya, or the sun, from the heavenly world; they then secure the sun with reins or fasteners of various kinds. Moreover, the same verbal root to describe the falling down of the sun, *ava pad*, is also used for the miscarriage of an embryo (TS; 5.1.6–7; JB 1.306). In the case of the falling-down embryo, the umbilical cord is sometimes used as the fastener that keeps the embryo in place. See Jamison, 1991: 202–211; see also Patton, 2002: 54.

   Further cosmological implications of miscarriage are contained in the well-known myth of Mārtāṇḍa Aditi's eighth child, who is aborted by his brothers and born as a shapeless egg (KS 11.6; MS 1.6.12). In certain version the Mārtāṇḍa becomes Vivasvant Āditya by name, the ancestor of humans, as the dead parts of the miscarried embryo are cut away and he is shaped into a living whole (SBM 3.1.3.4). As Jamison notes, several stories of miscarriage are about the birth of the sun, or a form of the sun, where he is a patched-up result of a failed birth. Moreover, his rebirth after injury must be accomplished in the prescribed manner (see Jamison, 1991; and Patton, 2002).
10. Translation is my own, in consultation with Doniger, Maurer, and Geldner.
11. Translation is my own.
12. The second hymn, *Ṛg Veda* 1.101, seems to have a divergent etymology, in which *garbha* is misunderstood as "embryo" and is not the name of a people.

13. Jamison (1991) also discusses at length the role of the Ātreya, the descendant of Atri, in the Āśvamedha ritual, the grand year-long horse sacrifice. In this ritual, the Ātreya is someone with mottled skin, brought into the sacrificial arena and then ritually banished from the territory. *Mantra*s that invoke abortion, or *bhrūṇahatyam* (to be discussed later), are recited over him. In Jamison's interpretation, the Ātreya represents the miscarried/aborted fetus, and his appearance reflects the nebulous shape of an embryo not brought to term. The man in his ugliness is the aborted Atri of the myth, who survived an abortion and lived to tell the tale. As she puts it, "By invoking abortion they acknowledge its power, but by invoking it while libating an Ātreya, they undercut its power." As Jamison also writes of Atri, in a story recounted in Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa 2.4.2.15 and in the *Vādhula Sūtra*, Atri resulted from a miscarriage or abortion. The premature fetus is placed in a pot or a skin, mentioned earlier as a common "womb substitute" in Vedic mythology. In the *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, the gods assemble, in a rather ad hoc way, the aborted material (similar to *martāṇḍa*, the eighth birth of the sun, mentioned earlier). The end product is the seer Atri. In a parallel story in the *Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa* (1.151), a mother violently casts a child into a cleft, and the child, Sudīti ("very bright"), is then freed by an Aśvin-like pair.
14. See, for instance, Madhav Deshpande (2007), which examines the *yājuṣa-hautra* priestly dispute in "Early Modern Maharashtra," at the Fourth International Vedic Workshop, Austin, Texas, May 2007.
15. See discussion in McGee, 2002: 36–37. See also *Pāṇini Aṣṭādhyāyi* 1.2.67 and 1.2.64-71, where one gender is used to refer to groups of mixed gender within a single genus.
16. The larger discussion of whether women could own property is a thorny one, and relevant to their actual capacity to sacrifice, even if they had the formal *adhikāra* to do so. The evidence seems to suggest that even in Manu (9.192–193) they had the possibility of owning and inheriting property, albeit in limited estate. See McGee, 2002: 38–40.
17. It goes without saying that I agree with critics who charge Levi-Strauss might state incorrectly that the Cuna women have an easier time in childbirth, or that his implication that access to medical care is unnecessary in these cases. However, the larger question, of how these rituals might well work in alliance with appropriate prenatal care, is the concern of this piece. See, e.g., Wall, 1995: 12–15.
18. See, e.g., *Atharva Veda* 6.11.3.
19. See, e.g., Jha, 1907: xxxviii.
20. Also see Clooney, 1986: 105ff.
21. See Jaimini, 4.1.26 and 4.2.10–13, and discussion in Clooney, 1986: 206.
22. *Ślokavārtika* 2.235–78.
23. Staal, 1980, 1985, 1986, and 1988; Gonda, 1977.

24. In this work, Deshpande discusses the changing nature of priestly "recited" Sanskrit, from the early treatment of changes in mantra to the present-day usage of Sanskrit in American temples.
25. Also see discussion in Clooney, 1990: 105ff.
26. Ganesh Thite, personal communication, 2006. Also see Lubin, 2001, for a discussion of the revival of Vedic sacrifice as "civic spectacle"; and Smith, 2001, for a recent history of Vedic ritual in Maharashtra." Also see Patton, 2007, for a discussion of sacrifice as it pertains to women's lives.
27. See Clooney, 1990: 216–219.
28. See, e.g., Knipe, 2007, which focuses on *jirṇa*, or aging in a traditional Vedic perspective.
29. For example, see *Frontline* (February/March 2002) and Shineath, 2004, for discussions of how one might engage traditional narratives and symbols to change cultural attitudes toward female infants.
30. See, among others, the activities of the Association for Rural Development, Family, Health Care Counselling and Training Center, outside of Madurai. I am grateful to Deepika Bahri, personal communication, September 2007, for this information.

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CHAPTER 8

The Feminine Concept of Surrender in Vaiṣṇava Discourse

E. H. Rick Jarow

The Discourse of Surrender

A series of long-standing cultural, religious, and literary traditions of India have associated "sacred self-surrender" with the female voice. The great women of the epics are devotional, both to God and to their husbands, as exemplary devoted wives or *pativratā*s ("vowed to one's husband"). Their love breaks beyond the precincts of dharma as prescription, and moves toward self-sacrifice and ultimate self-surrender. As Charlotte Vaudeville (1962: 33) put it, "the pure Hindu wife, the *Satī*, is already a type of *bhakta*."[1]

Likewise, in early Tamil poetry, Nammālvār speaks as a woman on matters of love. The seventh-century Śaiva saint Sambandar describes himself as a woman devotee prostrate at the feet of the "Lord with Matted hair." The *Padma Purāṇa* speaks of sages who in a long past age attained the realization of Absolute Reality and still prayed to become female maidservants of Kṛṣṇa in their next incarnations.[2] The story of Kṛṣṇa and his ultimate devotees, the cowherd women of Vrṇdāvana, is often touted as the apotheosis of such surrender, and the religious practice (*sādhana*) of remembering Kṛṣṇa's play on earth (*līlā smaraṇa*), which was developed from this narrative by Bengali Vaiṣṇavas, involves visualizing oneself as a youthful female attendant of Rādhā.[3]

How one understands and locates the phenomenon of self-surrender and its connectedness to a feminine sensibility in Indian traditions certainly has a lot to do with where one stands. Specific lineages may

articulate definitive positions, but since we live in a time of implosion, in which teachings and discourses from many periods and lineages are squished together as people on a public bus, critics as well as aspirants may find themselves in a postmodern Arjuna-like position: confused as to what is the "right path," caught betwixt and between, trying to negotiate through a muddy middle.

In the spirit of Purāṇic discourse, I appeal to anecdotal evidence, along with texts and their contexts, in this exploration of the feminine concept of surrender. And while I am mixing strands from various eras, I take my methodological lead from the Purāṇas themselves, the great Indian compendiums of epic lore that amplify important tropes rather than construct theories. The hermeneutics of intersubjectivity, advanced by this volume, would encourage such an approach because it allows the scholar to remain in conversation with the "Other" while continuing on the path of critical inquiry. Such an exploration, nevertheless, throws one into heated controversy, for "surrender" has become contested ground in terms of sharply disparate visions of feminine empowerment. Western colonialists and Hindu reformers have often looked at it with disgust and shame, seeing the ideal of surrender as reflecting an assortment of social ills and moral degradations. The archetype of divine love as a feminine province, however, continues to hold its own weight and makes its own claims, which may not only be as persuasive as any others, but also point to new vistas of human expression and possibility.

The *Śrī Ɣantra*, a contemplative diagram of nine interlocking triangles around a central point (surrounded by two circles of lotus petals encased in a square frame), is an age-old symbol of the Goddess and may be a fitting entry point for this exploration, as it seeks to embody the unknowable and inconceivable through a process of engaging and reconciling opposites.[4] It embodies at once the transcendent Goddess in the vaulted heaven and the immanent *Śakti*, the devoted woman at the stove, offering the possibility of reclaiming opposites through engagement.

As a visual meditative device, the *Śrī Ɣantra* can usher one into inconceivable realms of reality, presenting an extraordinary interactive mind-map that unfolds through meditation, with each precinct revealing a new set of projections, imaginings, and worlds within worlds to ultimately be dissolved through entry into the center of the triangle. All this "dissolution," however, may reappear in a new way, as the nondualist *advaitin* Totapuri Baba found out when trying unsuccessfully to cross the Ganges with his boat refusing to move and the Goddess laughing at him, so they say, making him wonder if

his "curing" the celebrated adept Ramakrishna from his "devotional duality" might not have been the last word on things.

Dissolution into the center can be construed as akin to surrender. It is the ending of the separate self—the psycho, the sexual, the spiritual, and the oceanic merging back into inconceivable oneness—absolute in its demand, with no partiality possible, no way around, no substitutes or protestations. One must turn toward the center. And while the triangles may induce oppositions and paradoxes through their variant perspectives, one is asked to traverse them, to not get locked into any one vision that would prohibit one from entry into the realm of nondual reality. Even so, the yantra remains, and the world remains, to be negotiated perhaps in a different way.

In tantric Buddhism, which has connections to both Vaiṣṇava and Śākta traditions in Bengal, the ultimate realm of reality is said to be nondifferent from everyday reality. In the everyday land of Vraja, the supreme goddess of love, Rādhā, appears as a village milkmaid. The entire land of Vraja, where Rādhā sports, is said to be a *maṇḍala*, a meditative locus taking one out of mundane space (a yantra of landscape, so to speak). In this land, on more than one occasion, one may overhear conversations in tea stalls that marvel at the ability of Vraja to encompass heights and depths together—sublime mysteries and crummy, overpriced tea (*chai*) in dirty glasses.

I am appealing to the *Śrī Yantra* to facilitate consideration of divergent visions of "the feminine" without them canceling one another out. After all, there are so many paradoxical highs and lows, such as seeming contradiction between the sublimity of the Goddess and the nonsublime textual descriptions and social treatment of women. The yantra, however, keeps forcing one to consider "the other" side as every conclusion sets up its contrary one.

The "text" of the *Śrī Yantra*, or the *maṇḍala* for that matter, cannot appear without a context, be it the mind of the aspirant or the social historical milieu, and context almost always insures contraries. Oppositions need not nullify one another. Sir Monier-Williams' dutiful declaration that he created his dictionary to serve the Boden Chair's stated mission of converting the natives of India to Christianity does not obfuscate the fact that he produced a remarkable work. Likewise, the mundane and the sublime, the woman and the goddess, can sometimes converge and sometimes diverge: one cannot separate divinity from society, goddess from woman, or power dynamics from sublime heights of feeling. Therefore, the "spiritual" ideal of surrender will inevitably be intertwined with "worldly" experience as well as the "other-worldly."

Although I am focusing on the "Vaiṣṇava voice," I do not want to focus on one particular construct of "Vaiṣṇavism." Not only are there variant Vaiṣṇava voices (Āḷvārs, Pāñcarātra, Śrī, Vallabha, Gauḍīya, and the rest), but also these voices are inextricably bound to other voices (*śākta*, *śaivaite*, *tantric*, *advaitin*, secular). Therefore, I explore the issue of surrender through an amplification of the language, literature, rhetoric, and philosophies of this phenomenon to see how and why they most definitely tend toward the feminine sensibility in literatures informed by Vaiṣṇava ideals. I also want to look at more contemporary social and political critiques of this ideal, not to deny or decry its sublime aspects, but to amplify its dimensions. My intent here is to highlight the deeply contrasting perspectives that exist concerning "surrender," to see why it so often carries a feminine voice, and to suggest how it may be reclaimed in our time. Ultimately, I suspect that any understanding or discussion of surrender will prove to be deeply dependent on the context in which the term is employed. Contexts, however, may be multivalent, like Sanskrit virtuoso poems that literally mean two things at once depending on how one construes the euphonic combinations between words. Likewise with the phenomenon of surrender—it may be an ecstatic offering of ultimate pleasure, a blissful extinction, or it may be a pragmatic offering of submission, a white flag in the face of hopeless odds. My point is that, just as the Goddess need not exclude the disenfranchised woman, one living reality need not preclude another.

Inevitably, discussions of "surrender" become enmeshed in sexual politics and conundrums. Perhaps what appears as surrender is actually triumph. Jayadeva's Rādhā, for example, gets her way with Kṛṣṇa, but only under the cover of nightfall and secrecy. This immediately leads to the following question: "Does she really get her way, or has she been marginalized, eroticized, and theologized out of the daylight world?"

This consideration may put the scholar in somewhat of a bind: surrender, as an ideal, is antithetical to conventional academic endeavors. It is predicated upon faith, experienced through emotion, and is free from any hermeneutics of suspicion (qualities that certain parties have attributed to women). But one can understand it in variant contexts as in the *Bhagavad Gītā*'s assertion that all beings follow the path of Kṛṣṇa. And while the final instruction of the *Gītā* is said to be one of surrender "abandoning all sacred paths, take refuge in me alone"—the text contains a final admonition, declaring who specifically should not hear its material, creating a qualification, another insider/outsider dynamic.[5]

"Surrender" can be both a theological position and a specific inner disposition (*bhāva*). Theologically, it is both the means and end of devotional practice, where it is seen as the doorway into heightened realms of love and understanding. The devotee is intoxicated by divine love in a manner analogous to human lovers (specifically, as a young woman smitten by a young man). However, this analogy is but the jumping-off point, for surrender is also the linchpin of the process of moving from desire to love, from conqueror to conquered, from feigned master to abject maidservant, the crowning position of spiritual achievement. The "maidservant mood" is an example of the disposition of surrender, being absolutely dependent upon, and open to, the lead of God, and the mood is said to be supremely blissful.

Perhaps it is not so much the disposition of surrender, but the way it has played out in many cultural forms that have led to it being conceived of by critics as abject capitulation, a way of keeping women down, and a marker of weakness and impotence; thus feminine in a pejorative sense. Religious figures, such as Vivekananda, often promoted the contrary "masculine" yogic tropes of self-control and self-conquest, and such discourse would serve as fodder for various brands of Indian nationalism. As with the triangles of the *Śrī Ɣantra*, however, the discourses of theology, the emotional realms of subjective experience, and the social institutions that surround them cannot be so easily separated.

Moreover, surrender has been construed as weakness and strength at once. The ideal of *śaranam-gati*, "going for refuge," is a "weakness" that allies one with ultimate power. One surrenders (hence apparent weakness), but only to the Supreme (a discriminative choice of strength). Hence the "purity" of Sītā, construed through her singular devotion to Rāma, is said to give her enormous strength and to carry her unscathed through a test of fire and through the wavering inconsistency of Rāma himself. Likewise, the *gopī*s, who are the supine, yearning cowherd woman of Vraja, are also fearless devotees who are willing to offer the dust from their feet to cure Kṛṣṇa's headache, even if doing so is an unpardonable offense punishable by eons in hell. And ruminating about all this can give anyone a headache, even God perhaps, who declares in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* that he is at a loss as to how to respond to the supreme devotion of the *gopī*s.

From a doctrinal perspective, surrender is not capitulation at all. The Gītā is clear about this when it discusses four types of beings who "come to God": the distressed, the seeker of wealth, and the seeker of knowledge, contrasted with the fourth—the one who has knowledge and whose surrender is understood to be a mature realization

that Kṛṣṇa is everything (*Bhagavad Gītā* VII.16–19). Hence, surrender becomes a mark of knowledge and an awareness of how things actually are, which produces its own form of agency and indissoluble power.

Philosophical and theological discourse, however, cannot remove itself from the culture that has generated it. The relationship of surrender to social convention and propriety are well established. Vaudeville's contention that the devoted wife (*pativratā*) of the epic is the prototype of the later *bhakta* is germane here. While the epic heroine does not manifest ecstatic love, her devoted service is a form of self-surrender that marks such action as the special province of the female. Such surrender it can be argued, however, has been envisioned as female through the imagination of men. Thus, the bhakti practice of a devotee assuming a feminine persona in order to enter into higher precincts of love and devotion again becomes suspect from a social perspective. Before coming down on one side or another of this argument, let us take a look at how "surrender" has been construed by major Vaiṣṇava thinkers and writers.

Etymologies

Throughout religious and literary texts, a number of principal terms have been used to indicate "self-surrender." Most pervasive, perhaps, is the word *śaraṇa* (of speculative derivation from √śṛ—"to resort to") combined with √*gam*, "to go," as in *śaraṇam gati* and *śaraṇam vraja* (*Bhagavad Gītā* 18.66). The idea of going to someone for spiritual refuge is seen early on in the Buddhist declaration of the "three jewels" (*buddham śaraṇam gacchāmi, dharmam śaraṇam gacchāmi, sangham śaraṇam gacchāmi*) and is probably derived from previous Vedic meanings of *śaraṇa* related to protection and defense.

Through their reading of the Āḻvārs and others, the Śrī Vaiṣṇava School developed their principal term for surrender, "*prapatti*" (√*pad* with the prefix *pra*).[6] *Prapatti* also appears in the epics, but it was the seminal Viśiṣṭādvaita theologian Rāmānuja who promoted it as the supreme principle of religiosity. In his *Aṣṭādaśabhedanirṇaya*, Rāmānuja delineates various "limbs" of *prapatti*, including *nikṣepa* (abandonment), *tyāga* (renunciation), and *nyāsa*, ("to fall down"—further discussed as "to fall down before someone," and equated with *śaraṇa-gati*).[7]

One significant point in the discourse surrounding these terms is their said sense of exclusivity (*ekāntitva*). One is charged to completely abandon other means of "elevation" or sources of refuge (*Śrībhāṣya*

IX.34. 1.1.1). This, as well as other factors, aligns *prapatti* with bhakti—both considered to be ever-coexistent. Their relationship, as well as their interactive nuances, would be the subject of much Śrī Vaiṣṇava speculation (Is one the prerequisite for the other? To what extent is self-surrender still an act of egotism? Is it the same "egotism" as mundane *ahaṁkāra* or "ego"? Is one still subject to socially prescriptive duties?).

Rāmānuja further discusses *prapatti* as an expression of emotional longing (*rasa prāpta prapatti*), coupled with aspects of prayerfulness and helplessness (*anāśraya*: literally, "having no other means of refuge") while decrying other means as useless. *Prapatti* also becomes connected with *antaraṅga*, an inner attitude of service. Since women were socially viewed as possessing all three of the aforementioned characteristics (emotional, dependent, and interiorized), it was a short step for Śrī Vaiṣṇavas to reference the devotee as a love-stricken woman. Ever further along this road, one could aspire to the state of *kaiṁkarya*, a deeply loving servitude in response to the absoluteness of the divine other.

Yāmunācārya (the said preceptor of Rāmānuja), whose *Stotraratna* had a strong influence on Rāmānuja, used similar terminology. Along with *prapatti*, we find the word *añjali* with √kr, "to offer" (taking on this significance from its sense of being a gesture with the two open hands placed together and extended outward). Yāmuna also speaks of *parabhakti* as "*prapatti naiṣṭikam*," a helpless servitude to God in a state of supreme resignation, while also declaring that the Lord requires the living being to realize God himself as all merciful.[8]

In the *Stotraratna*, Yāmuna employs another principal Vaiṣṇava trope of surrender: taking shelter (*śaraṇam* in one case, *āśraya/āṣrita* in another) and specifically taking shelter at the "lotus feet" of Viṣṇu. The image of surrender in prostration, with one's ritually and anatomically "highest" part, the head, lain before the lowest part, the feet, continually appears in religious and devotional literatures. While it can be looked upon as a cultivated quality of deep dependency, lowliness, and even abjection, the very inverse of agency and enjoyment, it can also be understood in its metaphorical sense of being absolutely overwhelmed. One is so permeated by the love and power of the "Holy Other" that one bows lowest in response to the highest. Note the sense of being prone, vulnerable, and dispossessed of will before the Lord. Yāmuna offers repeated obeisance: "I bow again and again to the one beyond speech and mind, who is the one true object of speech and mind, the unlimited, all powerful, ocean of mercy" (*Stotraratna* 18).

Along with the recognition of God's absolute nature, leading to complete dependence on his mercy, one also finds a corollary discourse of loss and abjection that will be amplified through the devotionally cultivated mood of *viraha* or "separation." This sustained meditation of surrender is characterized by a complete disinterest in one's own condition and therefore a full and deeply emotional focus on the other. Yāmuna's text is replete with praise first and then meditations on the form of Viṣṇu, who is seen as all and everything for the surrendered self, who is described as both "dependent" and "supported" (*bharaḥ*). The rhetoric of loss and abjection will take this even further, advancing the idea that "seeking is more intense than finding" in terms of a full focus on and surrender to the divine object of devotion.

The *Puṣṭimārga* of Vallabha and *Gauḍīya Saṁpradāya* of Caitanya have their own perspectives on the aforementioned terms and bring the discourse on surrender to new levels. It is not possible to enumerate them fully here, but a few words may be in order. *Puṣṭi* itself literally indicates that which thrives and is abundant: hence, the polemic that without any effort, but by the grace of God alone, one attains bhakti. Caitanya's deputy Rūpa Gosvāmī's oft-quoted definition of bhakti gets to the heart of this matter: "*anyābhilāsitā-śūnyaṁ jñāna-karmādy- anāvṛtam / ānukūlyena kṛṣṇānuśīlanaṁ bhaktir uttamā*" (*Bhaktirasāmṛtasindhu*, 1.1.9).

"Ultimate *bhakti*" is defined here as exclusive, favorable (literally "going with the flow" as a *kula* is the bank of a river), and constant service to Kṛṣṇa untainted by knowledge (*jñāna)* or works (*karma*). "*Anyābhilāsitā-śūnyaṁ*" literally translates as "devoid of the quality of being desirous for another" and underscores the theme of exclusivity. The exclusivity issue is highly charged, particularly as it appears in the sphere of social norms as the *satī*, or virtuous woman who has no other object of service and devotion than her husband.

If we look at *jñāna* and *karma* not just as other spiritual paths in their external sense, but as attitudinal dispositions as well, we might gain further insight into the feminine nature of bhakti. *Jñāna*, "knowledge," as a modality of speculative inquiry, has a decidedly masculine flavor to it; the founders of philosophical schools are all said to be men. Likewise *karma*, as worldly action, has a decidedly masculine flavor to it. Even if the stage of the world is running through *śakti*, it is men who are given the leading roles in this play. Here, both the modalities of knowledge and ritual activity are seen as impediments to the path of surrender, setting up the oft-discussed dichotomy between "austere masculine knowledge" and "sensuous

feminine love." One may also note the "*ādi*" ("etc.") after *jñāna* and *karma*, indicating that any other "nonbhakti" path would also be considered an impediment.

Moreover, the "male path" through yogic and Śaiva traditions has often been cited as one of (self)conquest, culminating in the identification of oneself with the absolute, the complete antithesis of feminine surrender. The important exception to this is found in tantra, which might be construed as an "alternative discourse," and this would be a worthy subject of study. In any case, the male/female power dichotomy was amplified through colonial notions of masculinity, which were often thought of in terms of self-control and sexual abstinence, as well as through the contention that Indians were effeminate and hence weak (Nandy, 1983). The Indian nationalist reaction to these ideas severely weakened Vaiṣṇava discourse on surrender for the contemporary period, as Vivekananda and his reformist contemporaries harped on the need for control and masculine conquest. Gandhi, interestingly enough, might be seen here as someone trying to negotiate the discourse of surrender with the discourse of conquest, as Veena Howard's essay in this volume seems to suggest, but that is a matter for further inquiry.

In the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* and later Gauḍīya texts, the term *ātma-nivedanam* (to announce or "present" oneself) appears. The term "*ātma*" here would certainly be construed as "ultimate self," hence the connotation of offering one's full Self. Here there is a clear power differential as well as a particular protocol: one goes for refuge, falls down in front of, and offers oneself to the Lord. In terms of relationship, and particularly in light of the transactional nature of traditional Hindu society, surrender may be seen as the one relational position that neither asks, demands, nor expects anything in return. In a sense, it is putting oneself in the lowliest of positions. This understanding of surrender fits perfectly with the ideal of *sevā*, as selfless service. Indeed, Vaiṣṇava texts from the *Bhāgavata* to the *Bṛhat Bhāgavatāmṛtam* like to "rate" devotees by comparing their degrees of selflessness.

All of these attitudinal positions, of course, are ones that normative Hindu (i.e., Brahmanical) culture has claimed to be major components of the feminine ideal. A woman should be pure, exclusively devoted to her husband, servile, dependent, and the rest. To merely see surrender, however, as a construct of feminine weakness and dependency, or even purity for that matter, can be misleading. One can argue, as Ashis Nandy (1980) has, that the deeper sense of power in India has always been female—hence the male-institutional effort to control the feminine principle. Might these Vaiṣṇava discourses of

surrender point to a more profound and less overtly discussed sense of feminine power?

The Gauḍīya position is perhaps the most pointed in this regard. On one hand, all individual beings are doctrinally considered to be spiritual females in subordinate position to Rādhā whose service to Kṛṣṇa they eternally share. Thus, one may argue that the male God, as the only object of worship, holds a position that no human can approximate except through taking on the female disposition. An added consequence of this is that worldly sexuality is seen as being "counterproductive" (no pun intended), not simply in terms of it leading one further into the sticky nets of desire, but perhaps more fundamentally because it is seen as an effort to take the position of Kṛṣṇa, the leading male, and henceforth is repeatedly referred to as a disease.[9]

Further Characteristics of Surrender

Another aspect of the discourse of surrender focuses on the idea of "the enjoyer." Sāṁkhya sees the conscious witness Puruṣa as mesmerized by the dance of nature, Prakṛti; wanting to enjoy her, but afraid of entrapment in the feminine world of matter, hence seeking liberation through detachment. To surrender, then, is to renounce the role of "the enjoyer" since the masculine Puruṣa is the enjoyer whose position should not be taken on by individual beings.

Purāṇic literature is, likewise, filled with warnings about "entrapment in the feminine" in which the wiles of women, who are associated with emotionalism and sensuality, are said to lead to one's downfall (Jarow, 2003). The issue of desire is crucial to all of this, for desire ensnares one in the binding constituents of nature (*guṇas*). Hence, in the discourse on renunciation, being an enjoyer is sinful and fraught with danger. Ultimately, only God—whose purview is considered to be far beyond the human—could occupy the position of enjoyer, and the nondistinction between human and divine held in tantric contexts is not congruent with a Vaiṣṇava ideal of surrender.

One may reasonably contend that in supreme devotion, *parābhakti*, conditioned constructs no longer apply. Much is made, in this regard, of the end of Jayadeva's *Gītagovinda*, with Rādhā riding triumphant on top of Kṛṣṇa, having taken the role of enjoyer at the height of *līlā*. In the realm of *prema* or divine love, the argument goes, all conventions are nullified. Nevertheless, one never sees Rādhā in the *Gītagovinda*, or anywhere else, dallying with other men as Kṛṣṇa does with other women, so her "triumph" is somewhat circumscribed.

The ideal of surrender, then, to be enjoyed and to enjoy being enjoyed, is thought of as a feminine quality. Being enjoyed can still be said to smack of enjoyment, however, and so another thematic cluster in the discourse of surrender may be characterized as a descending movement "down" a scale from devotion, to self-effacement, to immolation. The bhakti rhetoric of complete and abject helplessness, as seen in the work of Yāmuna, is taken more than a step further in the following poem attributed to Mira.

> Don't go, don't go, don't go Yogi, I fall at your feet, your slave
> Unique is the path of prema bhakti, Lead the way there, My God
> With incense and sandalwood I will build my funeral pyre:
>
> Fire it with your own hands
>
> When I am utterly consumed, smear your body with my ashes.
> Merge my flame with your fire. (Alston, 1980: 124)

Here is a level of surrender beyond the *pativratā*'s that approaches the ideal of the *satī*'s ultimate vow of devotion: a *liebestod* that does not just see death as the logical end of love, but as a living doorway beyond mundane constructs and compromises epitomized by marriage and household.

Psychology and Phenomenology

Through the plethora of doctrines and practices in Vaiṣṇava traditions, one sees the theme of surrender linked with the feminine at every turn, but how one observes this may be crucial, for insider/outsider issues inevitably come into play here. When we look at them closely, they are rarely cut and dry. On the one hand there is the contention of the devotee that surrender is both a necessary means to the full realization of divinity as well as to the full flowering of divine expression. On the other hand, there are psychologically and politically aware observations that detail how the promotion of female devotional sentiment serves a particular social order and its ruling class. The milkmaids of Vṛndāvana stay safely out of the power dynamics of the world, and since the world can be dismissed as *māyā*, anyway, this is not seen as an important issue. One result of this attitude, however, is that although *Vraja-dhāma* may be known as the transcendental abode of Śri Kṛṣṇa, it is also a polluted catastrophe, replete with poverty, political corruption, and thirty meters of

tainted groundwater. Beyond the contention that the ideal of surrender promotes abstention from the world and its plays of power is the argument that it actually encourages economic and social injustice. Bhakti's exalted vision of spiritual servitude may siphon off potential engagement and social effectiveness by encouraging "the best and the brightest" to retreat from the world into palliative and compensatory visions of bliss. From this critical point of view, the religious appropriation of normative tropes of ideal femininity as "pure" and "devotional" is seen as not only keeping women at the lowest rungs of social power, but also as sending men down there with them.

Within the greater sphere of Hindu *dharma*, there are variant contentions about the true nature of surrender. Nondualists (advaita-vedāntins) insist that surrender is a provisional means, but not an end, since one already exists in flawless unity. Likewise, some tantrics might see the ideal spiritual aspirant to be a hero, as opposed to a maidservant—a lover of the Goddess—a position that is attainable by a human, albeit rarely. Even in tantric Śākta traditions, however, the hero-lover is a secondary phenomenon. The child of the Goddess is seen much more than the lover. In fact, the arrogance of Mahiṣa, the great buffalo demon in the primary myth of the Devī, is his belief that he can be the lover of the Goddess, a notion that leads to his quick demise. Thus, even in service to the Devī, as June McDaniel (1989: 114–115) points out, the feminine form is believed to be preferable. McDaniel cites the following passage from the *Devī Bhāgavata Purāṇa*:

> O auspicious one! How can we understand thy sport? O Mother! We are transformed into young women before Thee; let us serve Thy lotus feet. If we get our manhood, we will be deprived from serving Thy feet and thus of the greatest happiness. O Mother! O Sire! I do not like to leave Thy lotus feet and get my man-body again and reign in the three worlds. (III.5.13–15)

Even in the non-Vaiṣṇava world then, devotion eschews masculinity. In her study of classical Indian poetry, in an obliquely related example, Martha Selby (2000: 111) finds that "the masculine becomes largely unsymbolizable" with images of male desire and anxiety mediated through the feminine subject. Hence, one might say that in the mainstream world of religious India, surrender to the divine is the feminine prerogative.[10]

Perhaps, historically speaking, reclamation of the feminine voice could not occur until it had reached its nadir of legitimacy and

prestige. The trope of heightened spiritual femininity came in for severe criticism, both from Western colonialists and from Hindu reformers influenced by their discourse. Toward the end of the colonial era, connections were drawn between the feminine posture and the submission to colonial oppression, as a new generation worked to shed the bane of "unmanliness and inferiority" (Minor, 1986: 64–68). Vivekananda pointedly despised "effeminate men who take on the mood of women" (Kripal, 1995: 26) as a good deal of Indian religious culture became less enamored with the feminine sweetness of Vraja.

The fact that the "critics of surrender" were hardly limited to non-Hindus emphasizes the key point that there are no fixed insider and outsider dichotomies. The triangles of the *yantra* keep intersecting with one another, leading to new perspectives, but not to conclusive resting places. In the spirit of creative dialogue, I would like to look at three major arguments against the feminine concept of surrender, and then see how practitioners might reply and how history might reclaim this unique spiritual disposition.

The Ideal of Surrender Is a Response to Colonialism

One perspective on the feminine concept of surrender is to see it within a context of patriarchal ideologies of domination that fix the locus of communal power in the *polis*. Since women are generally not part of this power structure, the "feminine qualities" they are said to embody move toward the margins of society. Norvin Hein (1982) advanced a like suggestion, in this regard, speculating that the "erotic community," contiguous with the rise of Rādhā, might be a response to a loss of political and social power. The worship of Viṣṇu as a powerful regent becomes more of an embarrassment than anything else when another people and their perspectives have overrun the worshipper's culture. The move toward a pastoral deity, along with an ideal of feminine surrender, reflects a safe social solution, or at least a politically expedient move. One could conceptualize this as a movement away from *vīrya* and toward *madhurya*, from manly heroism to feminine sweetness. Aside from the much-celebrated civil disobedience of Caitanya against the local Kazi's ban on public chanting of the name of God, there were no serious efforts by bhakti practitioners or theoreticians to challenge or transform the social order, likewise verses such as the following one from the Nārada Bhakti Sūtras allow Vaiṣṇavas to completely remove themselves from the political sphere, "Now that

(Divine Love) is achieved through renunciation of both attachment and of the objective world." The "surrendered soul," therefore, need not worry about the miseries of the world, for he has surrendered himself, the world, and the Veda (*niveditāmtalokavedatvāt*).[11]

All this reminds me of events that took place in the United States in the late 1960s and early 1970s when groups such as the Jefferson Airplane sang, "When the truth is found to be lies and all the joy within you dies, don't you want somebody to love?" Eros is taken out of a fractured social order, privatized—or in the case of the United States, capitalized—and amplified into a supreme value that remains marginal enough to slip under the radar of power interests.

In the previous scenario, the feminine concept of surrender serves the social order by siphoning off potential rebellion, even as it dismisses the social order as insignificant. The strategic movement here is not really to "feminine eroticism," but to transcendentalism in a female form. One can only wonder, in this regard, if the repeated and severe insistence on the other-worldliness of the relationship between Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa in Gauḍīya and other tracts from two or three generations ago were direct reactions to (or defenses against) the onslaught of colonial-generated discourse that proclaimed Hindu deities to be licentious and abominable (Inden, 1986: 401–446).[12]

One cannot speak of the "erotic community" without further discussing its repudiation within Indian society, particularly at the dawn and subsequent development of the nationalist era (indeed this might further bear out Hein's thesis). Interestingly enough, one way it was repudiated was by turning it "inside out." I am thinking particularly of the Brāhmo Samāj and Arya Samāj's "discourses of accretions" that proposed a "pure Vedic tradition" of selected Vedas and Upaniṣads, with the Purāṇas as well as regional, "licentious," "irrational," and nonbrahmanical practices thought of as toxic accretions upon a pristine, essential tradition. The British trope that Indians demonstrated "effeminacy of character" was too often taken to heart (whether this trope was a response to the dispossessed feminine of the colonial peoples is a fascinating subject that cannot be tackled here) and the culture of bhakti came to be seen as regressive. In her discussion of Hindi versus Braj, in this regard, Heidi Pauwels (2001: 449–481) cites a declaration of Hindi professor Badrināth Bhaṭṭ that "the sweetness of Braj had turned India into eunuchs."

The "insider response" would insist that the spiritual practice of devotion occurs in a spiritual realm that need not conflict with worldly duties, citing perhaps the well-known devotional discourse described in the Caitanya Caritāmṛta between Caitanya and Ramānanda Raya,

in which the inner reality of Rādhā and Kṛṣṇa reveals itself at the end of a long progression, beginning with the strict following of *varṇāśrama* rules and regulations. Moreover, the *Bhagavad Gītā* itself counsels a surrender that is congruent with the fulfillment of political and social functions. Arjuna is a warrior, and remains a warrior, even after receiving the teachings of Kṛṣṇa. This discussion brings one, however, to what may be the core of contemporary activist discourse: Can one conceive of spiritual liberation as separate from political, social, and economic freedom?

While many contemporary critics would answer resoundingly, "No," the castigation of the "effeminate Braj sweetness" by modern Hindi poets, swamis, and nationalists, the return of Rāma as a martial emblem of political empowerment, and the ubiquitous rise of Hanumān, associated with the cultivation of physical and martial strength, tend to muddle the inexorably interwoven fields of politics and religion. Again, opposites converge—manly conquest and feminine receptiveness, as popular religious sentiment blows back and forth with the prevailing winds of time.

Sentiments shift, however, and the reclamation of the feminine in this regard may have to do, not so much with gender politics as with a larger cultural transformation. Bhakti, after all, began as a revolt against brahmanical hierarchy. To surrender to God meant not to surrender to the social order. This implies more than revolt; it points to the affirmation of the inner life, of feeling, of sweetness, as a value in and of itself and in face of martial and like values. If Rāma was so easily able to sacrifice Sītā for the "good of the polis" (as Agamemnon sacrificed his daughter Iphigenia to go to war) perhaps the "bhakti answer" is not to start a gender war by drowning the returning king in his domestic bathtub, but rather to restore the value of surrender that the measure of a human being may be revealed by what is felt as well as by what is achieved.

Iron versus Gold

The next issue I would like to look at here is the nature of "surrendered love" itself. Vaiṣṇava discourse continually emphasizes that worldly love and spiritual love are diametrically opposed to one another. More specifically, there is the insistence that *kāma* (worldly desire) is phenomenologically distinct from *prema* (pure, "otherworldly" love), a distinction often spoken of as a comparison between iron and gold. This "definition" of the purity of love seems to generally appear uncontested, but I believe it deserves closer scrutiny.

Kāma is said to be characterized by a desire for one's own pleasure, whereas *prema* is characterized by a desire for pleasure of the other. However, if considering the happiness of the other is the true measure of love, there may be some problems to contend with.[13] First, this consideration of happiness is more often than not depicted in terms of being at the service of the other, which might place slaves and prostitutes at the top of this hierarchy. The insider response is that service and desire for the pleasure of the other is not personal debasement as a survival strategy, but is a natural expression of the freedom, as the oft-cited *ātmarāma* verse in the Bhāgavata declares (claiming that even self-satisfied sages are attracted to the qualities of Hari).[14]

The requisite understanding of loving service, the insider respondent would parry, is that it is not personally motivated. Hence the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa* proclaims that bhakti must be unmotivated and unceasing in order to please the self (BHP 1.2.6). Hence *nirodha* (cessation, as in the ending of all self-interest) and *ātmarāma* (satisfaction in the self) are prerequisites of supreme bhakti. One can still wonder, however, at the apparent lack of mutuality, communion, or compassionate inclusion in these descriptions. After all, much of the Gosvāmī literature on the subject appears to be more fetishistic than relational. Is the desire for the pleasure of the other really a sign of love, or is it a survival mechanism for someone who has no other choice? If indeed Rādhā and Krṣṇa are one, and Rādhā, as the theologians contend, is Kṛṣṇa's *hlādinī-śakti*, or the divine aspect of joy and bliss, is there any distinction between the pleasure of one and the pleasure of the other? A love that is primarily seen in terms of one serving another arguably smacks of sacrificial medievalism that remains ensconced in power dynamics in which the primary metaphor is not love as sharing but as submission.[15]

The tradition would respond that *prema bhakti*, in its insistence on surrender, seeks to subvert traditional hierarchies by encouraging its aspirants to take on the persona of being the lowest of the low: hence its rhetorical glorification of what Mackenzie Brown (1990: 72–75) has labeled "grace by deprivation," or the loss of wealth, health, position, and even life itself as the grace of God. Hence, the greatest *gopīs* in the *Bhāgavata Purāṇa* are said to be the ones who did not make it to the *rāsa* dance. Deprived of their meeting with Kṛṣṇa, they were deprived of life itself, as the burning fires of separation immolated their bodies, but moved them to the apex of the devotional hierarchy in the eyes of the devotional community.

In religious traditions and institutions of "Hindu" India, such hierarchy has become solidified through the complex, variegated, but

always present notion of the guru, who becomes (in certain traditions) the living, visible emblem of the deity, and hence the sole valid object of devotional love in this world. We return again to the insistence on exclusivity in Vaiṣṇava sensibility and again wonder if such exclusivity is a sign of love or a mechanism for social and psychological control. Is the *dasī*, the "slave heroine," a model of love or of love as abjection?

Moreover, if the feminine concept of surrender leads to divine servitude, what becomes of Śakti herself? What becomes of the power aspect of the feminine? Can the overwhelming victory of Durgā, the fierce power of Kālī, and the expressive wisdom of Sarasvatī be so easily absorbed and subsumed by the charm and meekness of Rādhā? What if the "transformation of lust" and the subsequent turning away from "the world" lead to an "idealized feminine" that cannot accept more powerful, solid, and less ethereal forms of the female (as in the Tulsi *Rāmāyaṇa*'s refusal of the notion that a "real" Sītā came under the power of Rāvaṇa, insisting that only a "shadow" form of Sītā was kidnapped)? In such a case, the promotion of self-abnegating love would again be a way of circling the patriarchal wagons and keeping the feminine power at bay.

Religious forms and dispositions possess a resiliency, however, that confound secular critics and historical ideologues. Devotional bhakti may be poised to make contributions to an emerging culture that could not have heretofore been imagined. Specifically, the ideal of "other worldly love" may serve as a corrective to the vulgar discourse of romantic love as the be all and end all of life that currently floods international markets through Hollywood and Bollywood. Moreover, just as bhakti challenged the "conceits" of nondualistic discourse by affirming the separateness of Rādhā and the integral necessity of her devotional disposition, it may now challenge the "idol of the self" promoted by popular "gurudom" in India and abroad. The supreme vision of *prema* is an ideal that may also contest a contemporary vision that cannot see beyond social strata, commodification, and self-satisfaction as ultimate values. Thus *prema-bhakti*, with its supreme value of surrender, offers "a way out of romance" that is not laced with the downward spirals of cynicism and bitter irony that characterize many Western critiques of the romantic ideal.

The Inner Being as the Divine Feminine

The idea of all humans as feminine and divinity as supreme and masculine is not unique to either Vaiṣṇava or Indian theologies. I would

argue, however, that it is pervasive in the religious life of the subcontinent. There are other ways of relating to the divine, of course: the reverence of the *sevaka*, the detached peace of the *jñāni*, the immanent embrace of the *tantrika*, and the heroic *yogin* as Śiva himself, but the question of why surrender and devotion seem to gravitate toward the female form is one that scholars and partisans seem to skirt around, remaining a problem to a world that is bent on gender balance, if not equality.

Vaiṣṇava theology claims that when the Absolute manifests itself, "His" overwhelming power and presence assumes the male gender; the remaining creation, Śākti, is female.[16] The specific relationship to Śakti, of course, depends upon one's doctrinal perspective. What I want to focus on, however, is to what degree the relationship in Vaiṣṇava discourse between the "powerful and the power," and particularly between the male "lord" and the female "lorded" may reflect social-psychological concerns and constructs.

Since most, if not all, of the devotional texts were written by men, the phenomenon of spiritual surrender usually entails the male becoming female, "surrendering his manhood" so to speak. Sudhir Kakar (in Kakar and Ross, 1987) cites the fifteenth-century Gujarati saint Narsi Mehta in the following quote: "As I took the hand of the Lover of the Gopis, I forgot all else, even my manhood left me. I began to sing and dance like a woman. My body seemed to change and I became one of the gopis."

As mentioned previously, the mainstream Vaiṣṇava insistence that this surrendered love turned female should not be seen in mundane terms is suspect from certain perspectives. Those of Freudian disposition, for example, would perhaps label this phenomenon as latently homoerotic or sexually regressive. No matter what it may or may not be, however, the question of why religious elements in a patriarchal culture would want to yield their heroic, phallic trappings remains disturbingly alive. Do men perhaps want to be what they can never be and possess female creative power? Do they want to be inwardly female because women, as the social holders of emotion and passion, the ones who are permitted to mourn at funerals and wail at the loss of love, can express everything that the male has been trained to repress or deny? Is this a secret desire of man, as Kakar asserts—to become a woman (and not just a woman per se, but a *kiṅkarī*: a woman who has no other recourse)? On the other hand, are the male voices in these texts defending themselves against unconscious fears of emasculation? McDaniel (1989: 174) cites Bengali practitioners

discussing how by taking on the female mood during ritual sex, the drive for lust is destroyed, the semen is held inside, and "then a man becomes a woman."

One might also posit that in a male-dominated society, becoming female is a logical way of overthrowing conventional conditioning and leaving one's ego attachment, typified by attachment to maleness and control, behind. Perhaps, what we have here is a case of reverse power trappings, as the burden of being on top can finally be released before God, for only God is truly "on top," and men just masquerade as such. Freud's *Totem and Taboo* thesis would fit nicely in this niche. There has been a scramble for the top, an ongoing parricide, whose moral dreadfulness is displaced through strict adherence to the absent father, now present in the form of the guru (Hardy, 1983: 563e). Such "surrender," reaching its apex in the form of spiritual men becoming maidservants, would indeed be viewed as a social emasculation that allows society to function.

Becoming a woman to "reach God" may be one way of acknowledging a woman's power without losing face (as opposed to other bodily parts). It likewise may reflect the primacy of the son-mother over the lover-lover dynamic in Indian culture. From this standpoint, the male lover of the Goddess would reflect an incest taboo and would therefore be unacceptable in any direct form. One might speculate in this regard that this may be one of the reasons that tantra is so strongly associated with the taboo. It is not just a question of ritually partaking of forbidden things, but of nonprocreative sexuality as directly challenging the primacy of the filial dynamic.

There are many other arguments and perspectives around the "inner being as female" that deserve at least equal attention. In a recent discussion with a Vaiṣṇava *ācārya* around the word *prapatti*, I was told that the essence of its femaleness is neither about gender nor action. *Prapatti* (surrender) was said to be a "spontaneous disposition" that appears in face of the overwhelming love of God. Here is where one might see another form of reclamation, reclaiming the feminine voice as a voice of truth in which the discourse of surrender can hold its own with the discourse of the heroic. One is ennobled through yielding to, as opposed to triumph over, another.

There is another major form of reclamation regarding the ideal of the "inner being" as feminine: the "rehabilitation of the arts" into the "lived artistry" of bhakti. The culture of conquest tends to see the arts as existing on the periphery or as adornment for martial prowess and display, but the sixty-four arts of the *Kāma Sūtra*

are said to be practiced by the cowherd women at the center of their devotional life. A social order that can organize itself around beauty and celebration may be less inclined toward destruction. The acknowledgment of the feminine in terms of a disposition and the values that follow from it may have extraordinary consequences. Play becomes more prominent and less cut throat. The *gopīs* sing for Kṛṣṇa, not for capital, and their surrender is seen as blissful play and not as abject capitulation. Hence, surrender is seen as a gateway, a relinquishing of the need for dominance that allows one to "join in the play" (*līlā*). One area where this kind of sensibility might be emerging is in the return of dance and dancers to temples in India. *Nṛtya* (dance) may in fact be seen as the complementary discipline to *yoga*—as its feminine side. It may be no accident, in this regard, that *yoga*, the discipline of conquest of the body and the ending of thought, has increasingly taken on more feminine aspects in both India and in the West.

The Empire Strikes Back

Perhaps the archetype of surrender and submission is prevalent in so many world religions because it makes sense—because in the face of the overwhelming and inconceivable breadth and power of existence, any sane human being would bend his or her knee and pray. Since this position comes through a sensibility where woman is exalted as a sublime servant and where the female energy is seen as holding the essence of mercy, the surrendered female would serve as a natural metaphor for this position.

The detailed works of Gosvāmīs of Vṛṇdāvana often seem to challenge the idea of the feminine as mere metaphor, however. For the emissaries of Caitanya, Rādhā is a real personality, as are the milkmaid *gopīs* and the eternal forms of those who follow them. Their stated goal is to remember and follow these surrendered residents of the holy *maṇḍala* of Vraja. This is the polar opposite of heroic lordship, and indeed, the archetypal epic villains (*asuras*) Hiraṇyakaśipu, Rāvaṇa, and so forth are upstart males who try to usurp the role of the leading male. Likewise, sexually aggressive, or just plain aggressive females, such as Śūrpaṇakhā or the goddess Durgā do not fit into the surrendered paradigms, and are either mutilated (Śūrpaṇakhā) or given their own realms (Vaiṣṇavas generally acknowledge Durgā as the superintendent of the world of *māyā*, and hence a devotee of Viṣṇu, but not as a member of the "inner circle of surrendered souls"). In fact, anyone with power is kept out of the *rāsa-līlā*,

including the god Śiva and the goddess Lakṣmī herself. Apparently, the sweet precincts of *mādhurya* permit no manifestations of majestic *aiśvarya* whatsoever.

From a certain social psychological perspective, devotional surrender can be seen as a defense against admitting emasculation—politically, economically, or spiritually. The entire phenomenon of transcendence, viewed from this light, is a defense mechanism in the face of the obvious and inevitable; as, for example, the translator of the *Bṛhat-Bhāgavāmṛtam* transforming the story of Aurangzeb seeing the lights from the temples in Vraja and cutting them down, to an Aurangzeb who could not see the transcendental holy light coming from the temples, and thus cut them down.

Let us return to the intersecting opposites of the yantra for a moment. On one hand, one can observe poor and abject widows in holy precincts all over India sitting on the ground and chanting the name of God. As their *nām-bhajan* drones on, some passers-by may see them as pious, while others will sneer at the fact that these destitute women are paid three rupees a day to chant by landowners and temple holders— barely enough to sustain themselves with a little flour and water until the next day. Nevertheless, when I quizzed a major Vaiṣṇava lineage holder about "who holds the power in Vraja," I was told (after exhausting all my answers) that it is "the widows." No one seems to be waiting in line to procure this particular form of power, however, which is why such "surrender," to some, remains suspect.

Perhaps a quality that needs to be developed here is a conscious androgyny that would allow for rigorous scrutiny as well as reverential resignation, and a scholarship that could both empathize and criticize, for both modalities are stronger when supported by the other. If we insist upon construing surrender from a hermeneutics of suspicion alone, without the method of dialexis, however, we run the risk of the most severe reductionism; we close the window on the *alaukika* realm, the ever-present *līlā* of loving exchange. We refuse to consider why Kṛṣṇa declares that the glory of the milkmaids fascinates him more than the Vedic hymns, or why Akrūra (and thousands of *bhaktas* after him) started rolling on the ground in ecstasy when coming into contact with the dust of Vṛndāvana. Why do kings abandon their thrones, *gopīs* their homes, and scholars (such as Caitanya) their accumulated knowledge when coming into contact with the *mahābhāva* of Śrī Rādhā? Might it be possible that both sides of the yantra point to truths in their respective spheres, and that the challenge might be to integrate them into an ongoing creative dialogic exchange?

Notes

1. Vaudeville's "Evolution of Love-Symbolism in Bhāgavatism" speaks of the Hindu wife, who is championed for sublimating her desire and her will in the service of her husband.
2. *Padma-Purāṇa, Uttarakaṇḍha* 272 166f: "In former times all the great *ṛṣi*s living in the Daṇḍaka forest, seeing Rāma and Hari there, desired to enjoy them...They all became women and were born in Gokula. Obtaining Hari through physical passion, they all found liberation from the ocean of existence."
3. The *rāsa līlā*, or "circle dance" codified in the Bhāgavata, depicts the divine Kṛṣṇa dancing with his devoted cowherd women, who have left husbands, family, and household to come to Kṛṣṇa. The dance is thought of as a divine expression of love existing beyond mundane boundaries of space and time.
4. The diagram, expounded in detail in Śrīvidyā writings of eleventh-century Kashmir, is also known as *Śrī Cakra*.
5. *Bhagavad Gītā* 18. 66–67: "This should not be spoken by you to those who are not austere, devoted, desirous of hearing, or envious."
6. Śrī Vaiṣṇavas trace the sensibility of *prapatti* back through the *Taittirīya, Kaṭha,* and *Śvetāsvatara Upaniṣads*, as well as through the epics the *Lakṣmī Tantra* and *Ahirbuddhya Saṁhita*.
7. See Dasgupta, 1954: 91, for a detailed discussion of Rāmānuja and the *aṅgas* of *prapatti*.
8. See Śrīla Yāmunācarya's *Śrī Stotraratna*.
9. Śuka, the principal narrator of the *Bhāgavata-Purāṇa*, refers to sexuality as *hṛt-rogam*, the disease of the heart.
10. One might ask, "What about tantra here? But tantra has always considered itself to be in (subversive) opposition to the mainstream. Likewise with yoga—although the *Yoga-Sūtra* does acknowledge *īśwara praṇidhāna* as a preliminary step on the path of yoga, this term, usually translated as "surrender to the Lord," has more of a "yogic" connotation: "to place down," "put," "reflect upon," stemming from √*dhā*, "*to place.*"
11. *Nārada Bhakti Sūtra* 35: *tat tu viṣayatāgāt. saṇgatyāgāt ca.*
12. Note Siddhanta Saraswati's discussion of this in his introduction to the *Brahma Saṃhitā* (1932).
13. The *Nārada Bhakti Sūtras,* 24, contend, e.g., that—*nāstyeva tasmin tatsukhasukhitvam*—in profane love (*tasmin*), happiness does not at all consist in the happiness of the other.
14. "Even self-satisfied beings and silent sages who have gone beyond the knots of textuality are attracted to the qualities of Hari" (*Bhāgavata Purāṇa* 1.2.45).
15. For some reason, I am thinking of Jean Paul Sartre here, who could only envision sexuality from an Adlerian perspective of wilfulness and power over another.

16. Hardy, 1983: 536–545.

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CHAPTER 9

Gandhi's Reconstruction of the Feminine: Toward an Indigenous Hermeneutics

Veena Rani Howard

The ancient laws were made by seers who were men. The women's experience, therefore, is not represented in them.

—CWMG *37: 470*

I believe that it is our duty to augment the legacy of our ancestors and to change it into current coin and make it acceptable to the present age.

—CWMG *57:241*

One of the most controversial issues surrounding Gandhi is his construction of the feminine as he attempts to integrate traditional Hindu conceptions of women with his own progressive vision of women's roles in the modern world. Many scholars have acknowledged Gandhi's commitment to challenging oppressive patriarchal customs, including child-marriage and dowry, as well as his attentiveness to bringing women into the public sphere. Gandhi acknowledged and lamented the existence of women's oppression in India, stating, "Woman has been suppressed under custom and law for which man was responsible and in the shaping of which she had no hand . . . [Men] have considered themselves to be lords and masters of women instead of considering them as their friends and co-workers" (qtd in Joshi, 1988: 323).

Gandhi considered the participation of women in his nonviolent movement to be an essential ingredient for its success. He wrote, for example, "Women's marvelous power is lying dormant . . . My experiment in non-violence would be instantly successful if I could secure women's help" (*The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi* [hereafter *CWMG*] 96: 77). But Gandhi also valued traditional Hindu conceptions of womanhood, rendering his thinking about women highly complex as well as controversial. It combines traditional Hindu values that are generally patriarchal with progressive gender values, and it prescribes the practice of virtues that in Hinduism are generally considered peaceful and feminine to motivate both women and men for action in the public sphere. Aspects of his attitudes toward women that have raised controversy include his experiment with celibacy in marriage and his unconventional approach toward sexual abstinence in general. I submit, however, that an intense focus on the highly debated facets of Gandhi's own sexuality has perhaps overshadowed his legacy of efforts aimed toward the welfare of women and strong affirmations of women's worth.[1]

In keeping with the present volume's hermeneutics of intersubjectivity, I aim in this essay to analyze Gandhi's views of the feminine, as rendered in his writings, in relation to his own cultural, religious, and historical context. In so doing, I will also draw upon the work of other scholars who have examined Gandhi's words for their analysis of his views on this subject. Such an approach allows for a fresh understanding of those Gandhian views that offer empowerment to women. It is my view that Gandhi's radical reinterpretation of traditional Hindu feminine virtues, his discourse on the nature of the feminine ideal, and his strategy of embedding a hermeneutics of the feminine in an indigenous social context remain relevant today to women's ongoing struggle for gender equality.

Using the hermeneutics of intersubjectivity, which prompts us to take a subject's own self-understanding seriously, I explore Gandhi's writings and practices, wherein he negotiated and reinterpreted Hindu values in light of modern, progressive principles to create an innovative ideal of the feminine, including a new framework for addressing women's issues. This approach may not always lead to universally applicable conclusions, but it can allow for a complex yet constructive understanding that, in this case, may offer a model for the empowerment of women. First, I will argue that Gandhi used a specific vocabulary of virtues defined as "feminine" to articulate his moral methods of nonviolence and *satyāgraha* (literally, "truth-force," which Gandhi also described as "moral force," "love-force," and "soul-force"). I

maintain that he interpreted, in an innovative way, "feminine" virtues and qualities, which were traditionally also viewed as vulnerabilities. By valorizing these characteristics, he sought to empower women and mobilize them along with male activists for nonviolent struggle. Second, I seek to bring a fresh understanding to Gandhi's practice and public discussion on celibacy as a point of departure for addressing male hegemonic views about women and for introducing into India's liberation movement a discourse on gender and sexual issues. Finally, I examine the literary and mythical style Gandhi used to coalesce traditional Hindu female models with modern goals of female freedom for the purpose of securing women's rights, for seeking to awaken them to their inherent potential, and for constructing his own vision of the feminine.

Hermeneutics of Feminine Virtues and Femininity

In his discussion of diverse critiques of Gandhi, Vinay Lal (2008) focuses attention on variations in the "feminist reading" of Gandhi, which simultaneously includes harsh critiques of his troubling explanation of femaleness, appreciation of his efforts to draw women into participating in the nonviolent struggle for independence, and deep ambivalence with regard to Gandhi's views about female nature and women's roles, especially when these views are couched in the vocabulary of Hindu mythology. In this vein, Lal points to the fact that, in spite of criticism of Gandhian views, many feminists and activists are "prepared to concede that Gandhi feminized the nationalist struggle" (60). For example, in her article "Indian Nationalism, Gandhian 'Satyagraha,' and Representations of Female Sexuality," Ketu H. Katrak (1992) notes the unique feature of Gandhi's nonviolent movement, observing, "Whereas other liberation struggles invited women to fight alongside men, Gandhi enjoined Indian men and women to engage in acts of *passive* resistance which feminized the usually masculine struggle against the colonizer" (emphasis in the original). She continues with a rhetorical question: "Who more than women, used to maneuvering patiently through patriarchal authority, could offer better models of passive resistance?" (395). It must be noted that Gandhi was keen to avoid any allusion to passivity in his method. He argued that "passive resistance means resistance to evil with inner force of instead of physical force," and therefore chose the word *satyāgraha* denoting the power of Truth or Soul (*CWMG* 8: 194). Traditionally, the soul-force is acquired though renunciation,

self-sacrifice (*tapas*), and practice of ethical qualities, which are linguistically feminine. Gandhi called *satyāgraha* "the weapon of the strongest," and asserted that it was "preeminently open to women" (qtd in Joshi, 1988: 258). Thus Gandhi affirmed the active power in nonviolent resistance and tied that force directly to women's innate capacities.

But crucial questions remain, namely, how was Gandhi able to transform the age-old tradition of women's "maneuvering patiently through patriarchal authority" into a mass mobilization of those patient and passive women to defy political authority? What were the overarching motivations and methods that guided Gandhi's feminizing of the movement and the nation?[2] If we are to understand Gandhi's ideal of the feminine and his views of women, it is important to address these questions.

Many of Gandhi's contemporary political revolutionaries and religious reformers, including Bankim Chandra Chatterji, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo, and Rabindra Nath Tagore, invoked the symbolism of the divine feminine for the purpose of reforming the conditions of women and reinvigorating the masses for social and political change. Gandhi also invoked similar religious and nationalistic symbolism—for example, divinizing India as *Bhārat Mātā* ("The Motherland") —but his discourse was more practical than theoretical. In Gandhi's thought, feminine power represented moral and spiritual force, which, to him, was far superior to the strength of arms. Gandhi trusted the power of "restraint and goodness" (*CWMG* 97:139). He thus emphasized the active power of feminine virtues and made them the core of his nonviolent resistance movement—a movement that included and empowered women as participants rather than as mere symbols.

Gandhi's writings reveal that the so-called feminization of the nonviolent independence movement through use of nonaggressive tactics and behavioral strategies that were traditionally associated with women was not a contrived effort on his part. Rather, it evolved organically from his personal proclivity for moral methods and the framework of his sociopolitical movement, as well as his unique understanding of Indian traditions. His strategy of *satyāgraha*, which he described as a power superior to the force of arms, was acquired through the practice of moral virtues such as *kṣamā* (forgiveness), *ahiṁsā* (nonharming), *pavitratā* (purity), *śānti* (tranquility), and *dayā* (compassion). Gandhi noted that these moral principles or ethical virtues are linguistically feminine and argued that "everywhere these qualities are met with in greater measure in women" (*CWMG* 60:166).

Traditionally, these qualities are understood to be active principles that guide the conduct of individuals engaged in combating negative emotional tendencies and striving to attain spiritual freedom (*mokṣa*). Gandhi interpreted his methods of *ahiṁsā* and *satyāgraha* in terms of the feminine-identified strengths of endurance, love, and self-suffering, and he inverted their power for his nonviolent political activism. Nicholas Gier (2008: 138) notes, "Gandhi once said that he wanted to convert the woman's capacity for 'self-sacrifice and suffering into *shakti* power.'" Gandhi lamented: "If only the women of the world would come together they could display such heroic non-violence as to kick away the atom bomb like a mere ball. Women have been so gifted by God . . . Women's marvelous power is lying dormant . . . My experiment in non-violence would be instantly successful if I could secure women's help" (qtd in Joshi, 1988: 359–360). Gandhi invoked the literal (rather than symbolic) power of feminine virtues that he believed could be awakened for social and political transformation.

Gandhi's use of the power of moral force has been interpreted as a counter-response to British rule, which symbolized male dominance and hegemony. Anup Taneja (2005: 52) points out:

> The counter culture of the Gandhi-led mass movement emphasized the feminine culture as opposed to the basic character of the British rule wherein the symbols of power, prestige, status and individual successes represented a masculine character . . . In this form of non-violent passive resistance, the masses firmly reject the oppressive, insensitive and immoral alien authority through withdrawal of support (without resorting to the use of force).

Because Gandhi emphasized the active nature of feminine qualities, he interpreted the elements that make women vulnerable as symbols of feminine strength. The emotional and biological components of pregnancy, childbirth, and childrearing are often understood as rendering women vulnerable and incapable of an equal participation in public life and political movements. For Gandhi, female fortitude through these experiences was proof of the strength required for his method of nonviolence. In 1940, he wrote:

> Woman is the incarnation of ahimsa. Ahimsa means infinite love, which again means infinite capacity for suffering. Who but woman, the mother of man, shows this capacity in the largest measure? She shows it as she carries the infant and feeds it during nine months and derives joy in the suffering involved. What can beat the suffering caused by

> pangs of labour? But she forgets them in the joy of creation . . . Let her transfer that love to the whole of humanity. (*CWMG* 77: 322–323)

Thus, Gandhi reframed as the precise locus of feminine strength and power the very same life events that others viewed as impediments to women's full engagement in social or political movements. On another occasion, Gandhi invited women to use their nurturing characteristics to instill in their children the qualities of independence and courage, arguing, "A woman nourishes the bodies of her children. In the same way, she should inculcate in their minds the qualities of independence, fearlessness, firmness, etc." (*CWMG* 21: 331). Gandhi's reference to such specific characteristics of feminine nature may be viewed as problematic as it dichotomizes the categories of femininity and masculinity; but by emphasizing the strength of normative female virtues for cultivating freedom and fearlessness for both men and women, Gandhi strives to bridge the gender divide.

Gandhi has been accused by some of his critics of essentializing female virtues to serve his own ends. Katrak (1992: 398) observes, for example, "Female sexuality was essentialized through Gandhi's appeals to the 'female' virtues: chastity, purity, self-sacrifice, suffering . . . These 'female' virtues were an 'investment' in his nationalist, nonviolent strategy." Certainly, it can be argued that Gandhi appears to be adopting patriarchal assumptions about feminine virtues and simply extending them to the political sphere. Manfred Steger (2000: 126) summarizes Sujata Patel's views on this issue by saying that "one of the various forms in which patriarchy presented itself in early twentieth-century India was through the formulation of a 'morally superior ideal woman, who was the embodiment of all the best and goodness of human life and the world.'" He takes note of Patel's argument that "Gandhi not only accepted these assumptions, but he extended them to fit his own perspective relating to the participation of women in politics." Although this claim is plausible given the nature of Gandhi's ideology, Gandhi's words and actions suggest that he did not perceive these virtues to be the monopoly of women, although *he found women to be more naturally inclined toward them*. Gandhi did not perceive the "feminine" and the "masculine" as sharply distinct categories, nor was he aware of later feminist readings of patriarchic structures that are now so familiar to us. Rather, he reclaimed the resources available to him and rechanneled them.

The most important of these resources, along with the purportedly "feminine" virtues enumerated earlier, is the power of voluntary self-restraint (*tapas*), which male yogis in particular use for

achieving material and spiritual goals within the Hindu tradition. In yogic systems of practice, *tapas* can be understood as a concentrated effort leading to physical purification and spiritual realization. *Tapas* denotes voluntary austerity, physical restraint, and mental discipline with the aim of "burning away" physical and psychological impurities. This effort is thought to prepare a yogi for spiritual enlightenment, enable mastery over one's life and environment, and bestow supernormal powers (*siddhi*). Some of these restraints, which have their origins in yogic asceticism, are also used by women—especially in practices such as *vratas* (vows) that involve fasting—for accessing spiritual power, though not authority, which was otherwise not available to them. Gandhi felt that due to the biological and social roles of women, their lives in general required greater self-sacrifice, and this made them ideal candidates for *tapas* (self-suffering), which he considered necessary for the success of his nonviolent struggle.

Gandhi sought to harness the power believed to reside in traditional religious virtues, such as the practice of *ahiṁsā* and the performance of *tapas*, to serve the goal of attaining India's *svarāj* (self-rule). He trusted that a collective performance of these traditional Hindu virtues would lead to India's freedom from the colonial regime. What was unique about Gandhi was that "in extolling these feminine virtues Gandhi had not excluded men" (Taneja, 2005: 53). He asked men not only to embody the virtues of sacrifice, nonviolence, and endurance, but also to do jobs traditionally assigned only to women. Gandhi and the male followers who lived in his *āśrama* did all the tasks that women did. Once a professor accused Gandhi of beginning "at the wrong end" by asking "able-bodied men" to take up spinning, which "appears odd in the eyes of most of the people." The professor argued that men "can't take up the work which has been associated in our country, for centuries, with women" (*CWMG* 31: 458). Gandhi replied as follows:

> It is contrary to experience to say that any vocation is exclusively reserved for one sex only. Cooking is predominantly the occupation of women. But a soldier would be worthless who cannot cook his own food...Fighting is predominantly men's occupation, but...Rani of Jhansi distinguished herself for her bravery as very few men did during the Sepoy Revolt. And today in Europe we find women shining as lawyers, doctors and administrators. (459)

This, of course, seemingly contradicts Gandhi's earlier emphasis on women's confinement to domestic duties, some of which

prompted Madhu Kishwar (1986: 56) to conclude, "For Gandhi, equality of sexes did not mean equality of occupations nor did it mean equality in the realm of work and power." This apparently contradictory approach may simply represent an evolution in Gandhi's own ideology. Alternatively, I argue it may be that Gandhi himself was trying to endow the conventional lives of ordinary women with dignity by highlighting the value and importance of women's traditional work, while rejecting unjust and oppressive treatment of women. On the one hand, Gandhi argued for women's natural disposition toward these virtues and self-restraint and asked them to awaken their own inherent power to confront male hegemony. At the same time, he invoked the feminine power of restraint to generate life in the abeyant soul of India: "India is today nothing but a dead mass movable at the will of another. Let her become alive by self-purification, i.e., self-restraint and self-denial, and she will be a boon to herself and mankind" (*CWMG* 24: 162). Gandhi's embrace of "femininized" virtues was a strategy that was essential to his vision of free India, defined by the moral principles of service and self-sacrifice.

Hermeneutics of Celibacy

Feminizing Celibacy for Addressing Issues of Gender and Sexuality

Various scholars have examined Gandhi's practice of celibacy (*brahmacarya*) in order to explore his views of women, gender, and sexuality. However, the question of how, specifically, Gandhi used celibacy to challenge stereotypes regarding women has been essentially overlooked. The term *brahmacarya* is frequently translated as "celibacy," but traditionally it also implies comprehensive control of the senses and contains nuanced religious and social meanings. Gandhi's writings reveal that his practice of *brahmacarya* is inextricably intertwined with his concern for public service and, specifically, his concern for the issues of women.

During the nationalist struggle, many male Indian reformers linked celibacy with the nationalist cause of independence and social reform. Steve Derné (2000: 237) observes, "Asserting control over one's own body as a way of rejecting the alien forces of colonialism, secularism and modernity has been an important component of men's nationalism in India." Gandhi also considered the practice of celibacy to be essential to the attainment of Indian self-rule, and his celibacy

has been viewed within this framework of a deliberate rejection of alien forces, including secularism and modernization. The problem is, as Derné notes, that "a politics of celibacy and a politics of sexual potency have both provided nationalist Indian men with a feeling of power by emphasizing sexual control of Indian women" (ibid.). Derné thus draws a connection between male sexual potency and sexual management of Indian women. If we analyze Gandhi's version of celibacy against the backdrop of Derné's argument, it is notable that Gandhi, unlike other nationalists, used *brahmacarya* practice to imbue himself with a moral authority that enabled him to challenge gender inequality and misogynist tendencies present in Indian culture.

Gandhi was not a typical renouncer (who leaves behind this-worldly aspirations), but he sought through his celibacy and other ascetic practices to acquire clarity of mind and psychosomatic powers, and to practice detachment and discipline, goals embedded in the traditional and mythic connotations of *brahmacarya*. Simultaneously, he used the traditional power of a renouncer to defy hegemonic attitudes regarding gender. By opening a public discourse on his celibacy, Gandhi created a forum for discussing feminine and sexual issues otherwise considered taboo in a traditional setting. This apparent contradiction between his practice and that of traditional ascetics, who generally maintain silence about gender issues, caused his closest followers to criticize his modes of practice as being affected by "Western influences" (Kumar, 2006: 13). I would aver instead that he was "ready to challenge taboos" (ibid.), not by deviating from the tradition, but through the traditional performance of an ascetic reformer who reinterprets Hindu traditions, myths, and symbols toward non-traditional ends.

Undoubtedly, Gandhi's theory and unconventional practice of celibacy as they relate to feminine issues are controversial (as has been noted by various biographers and Gandhian scholars). But they greatly influence his understanding of Hindu womanhood. Reflecting upon Gandhi's use of feminine symbols and methods (such as spinning, nonviolence, resistance), scholars term his endeavors as "feminizing the nation" and "feminizing the [Independence] movement," but I argue that he also sought to *feminize celibacy*—traditionally described in male sexual terms and valorized mainly in men.[3] Even though Gandhi often used the vocabulary of semen control, his rendition of celibacy was distinctly different from the nationalists' masculine discourse of dominance because it eschewed the muscular strength

and dominance usually implied by male sexuality while simultaneously asserting the purportedly feminine concepts of self-sacrifice and nonaggression.

By virtue of his celibacy, as well as his demeanor, Gandhi sought to feminize himself so that women would feel safe in a platonic relationship with him, without the mutual fear of arousal or intimidation. Unlike traditional *brahmacāris* who renounce all relations with women, Gandhi sought to become like a woman, psychologically, so that he could understand his wife and thereby other women fully: "I have mentally become a woman in order to steal into her [his wife, Kasturba's] heart. I could not steal into my wife's heart until I decided to treat her differently than I used to do, and so I restored to her all her rights by dispossessing myself of all my so-called rights as her husband" (*CWMG* 40: 413). Interestingly, through his celibacy Gandhi was seeking to free Kasturba and restore her autonomy.

Gandhi also ignored the advice of orthodox ascetic literature cautioning practitioners of *brahmacarya*, called *brahmacāris*, to avoid the company of women. Traditionally, women have been considered a challenge to an ascetic life. For example, it is stated in the *Mahābhārata*: "One who has taken that [*brahmacarya*] vow should not speak with women" (Dutt, 1994, Vol. VI: 318). Gandhi, however, paid no attention to orthodox conventions and "made women his allies and coworkers" (Ashe, 1968: 183). Even as a *brahmacāri*, Gandhi lived among women and did not hesitate to take personal services from them—even massages. This highly debated approach enabled him to confront the insidious stereotypes that segregate the public domain of males and females and construe women as temptresses. Within Hindu Indian culture the renouncer (*sannyāsi*) has the authority to serve as a catalyst for change for the purpose of alleviating social suffering, as has been noted by scholars and anthropologists (Dumont, 1970: 46; Narayan, 1989: 74–76).

Gandhi sought further to create a space in his monastery, or *āśrama*, where a woman could experience freedom. Traditionally, in the monastic setting, women are subjected to stricter rules and regulations, but women in Gandhi's *āśrama* were not "subject to any restraint" that was not also imposed upon men. Gandhi himself stated, "A woman, as soon as she enters the Ashram, breathes the air of freedom and casts out all fear from her mind. And I believe that the Ashram observance of *brahmacarya* has made a big contribution to this state of things" (*CWMG* 56: 191). Geoffrey Ashe (1968: 180) describes the distinctive nature of Gandhi's *āśrama*, which "was not like a monastery or convent, a house of celibates of the same sex. It

included both, and it included married couples." This unique arrangement was motivated and made possible by Gandhi's deep conviction of the efficacy of *brahmacarya* for transcending gender constraints. He presented a model that was traditional in principle but progressive in nature.

Unlike traditional *brahmacāri*s, Gandhi discussed frankly the trials and troubles he experienced with his formidable vow of celibacy in marriage. Traditionally, intense renunciatory disciplines compel ascetics to seek solitude from day-to-day life; consequently, their inner struggles remain hidden from public scrutiny. But Gandhi spoke frequently of the relentless struggle and setbacks arising from his vow of *brahmacarya*. By exposing his own failings, Gandhi may have been pointing to the infirmity of the male gender that had historically exhibited harsh attitudes toward women and often severely judged females for their moral transgressions. Gandhi put the burden of responsibility for these failings on the *brahmacāri* himself and sought to change negative attitudes toward women. He writes: "A true *brahmachari* will have no imperfection in him, no pretension and no fear. If you are such a *brahmachari*, why need you be afraid to talk to women?" (*CWMG* 95: 390).

Gandhi offered a new interpretation of the ascetic prohibition against touching women. "It is not," says he, "woman whose touch defiles man but he is often himself too impure to touch her" (*CWMG* 73: 319). By this rendering, Gandhi sought to liberate women from the charge of being temptresses by holding men accountable for their own projections of lust onto women. He strove to shake off the perception of women as an obstruction on men's spiritual path by invoking the traditional image of the Divine Mother: "Woman for a *brahmachari* is not the 'doorkeeper of hell' but is an incarnation of our Mother who is in heaven" (*CWMG* 56: 165).

Moreover, Gandhi sought further to integrate the masculine power of semen control with virtues and vulnerabilities traditionally perceived as feminine in nature. Anthropologist Joseph Alter (1994: 61) presents a comprehensive account of the scholarship on "the Hindu concept of *brahmacarya*" and surveys twentieth-century literature on celibacy. He demonstrates that the use of the term *brahmacarya* is primarily defined in masculine terms, and that in the ideology of nationalism "the rhetoric of *brahmacarya* is aggressively male." However, in his interface with femininity, Gandhi presented an image of the *brahmacāri* that was directly opposed to this traditional, aggressive male model. Even though he declared that nonviolence requires "the spirit of manliness in its perfection," he described his methods of self-

sacrifice and suffering in feminine terms (*CWMG* 21: 515). Gandhi's emphasis on the female virtues of self-sacrifice, tolerance, and austerities combined with his scrawny, half-naked body wrapped in a loincloth; his entourage of women associates of all ages; and his love for such "womanly" jobs as spinning, cleaning, and nursing allowed him to address female issues in a way no other *Mahātmā* had been able to do.

Gandhi also reformulated traditional religious discourse about voluntary male celibacy to highlight its connection to not only virility, but also vulnerability. In so doing, Gandhi seems to have been initiating a new paradigm for understanding celibacy, one that could supplant the machismo espoused by the then current militant nationalist discourse on celibacy. He used feminine corporeal metaphors to convey the hard work entailed in the practice of *brahmacarya*, asserting, "A man striving for success in *brahmacarya* suffers pain as a woman does in labor" (qtd in Alter, 2000: 27). Perhaps by using such metaphors he was equating the efforts of celebrated renouncers with those women who go unnoticed by society despite their courage and suffering during childbirth and childrearing.

Gandhi's predecessors, including social reformers such as Raja Rammohan Roy (1774–1833) and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820–1891), crusaded against the misogynist customs of widow burning (*satī*), polygamy, and the prohibition against widow remarriage but did not aspire to make women autonomous. Gandhi did, impugning cultural norms that positioned women as subordinate to men. According to Ronald J. Terchek (2000: 67), "Gandhi does not call on ancient texts to validate his claims for the autonomous woman" but instead "proceeds as if autonomy was always a part of Hinduism and argues that...women must be included." He also rejected any form of male imposition of chastity on women, suggesting instead that women practice celibacy as a means of rejecting male domination and the automatic control over their bodies legitimized by marriage.

What seems clearly unprecedented is Gandhi's unconventional rendering of *brahmacarya* as an essential tool for addressing the needs and concerns of women, as well as for the purpose of liberating them from a collective inferiority complex caused by archaic cultural conventions. By defining *brahmacarya* in terms of comprehensive self-control and encouraging men and women equally to practice it, Gandhi sought to deploy toward progressive social ends this traditional religious practice.

The Methodology of Using Traditional Narratives to Achieve the Goal of Women's Freedom

Gandhi appropriated Hindu narratives to blend traditional models of ideal womanhood with modern ideals concerning women's social freedom. Of particular interest in this regard is Gandhi's use and reinterpretation of female mythical characters and stories for the purpose of securing women's rights, seeking their empowerment, and constructing his vision of femininity.

Numerous scholars have drawn attention to Gandhi's choice of mythical female characters during his discourse about women's roles and his vision of the feminine. Madhu Kishwar (1986: 44), for example, notes: "Sita, Damayanti and Draupadi were the three ideals of Indian womanhood that Gandhi repeatedly invoked as inspirations for the downtrodden women of India." However, Gandhi was not unique in this regard. Anup Taneja (2005: 29) problematizes this nostalgia for the "glorious Hindu past" of India in the minds of revolutionaries and reformers of nineteenth-century India, who also called upon these female mythical models as a way of asserting the "great spiritual potential" of women in order to advocate traditional gender roles but without any attendant commitment to tradition on their own part. Taneja observes, "What reformers were trying was merely to raise the position of women in the society and that too, within the framework of the patriarchal norms" (32). He provides a snapshot of the sentiments of select progressive women thinkers who criticized the "double standards followed by the social reformers." Uma Nehru, one of the most "progressive feminists of the period" wrote: "The task of producing model women like Sita and Savitri seems incongruent with a social situation which does not oblige men to become a Ramchandra, a Krishna, a Bharat or a Yudhishter" (46). The social reformers attempted to evoke traditional female ideals and archetypes while indulging their own preference for Western lifestyles and language. The reformers were thus inhibited in their ability to identify with and communicate in an indigenous idiom to the vast majority of Indian Hindu women who inhabited a very different cultural world. Gandhi eschewed this disingenuous standard followed by some reformers and sought to challenge it by virtue of his own efforts to follow native methods and modes of living.

Even though Gandhi invoked the same examples as did other reformers, his interpretation of female mythical models is conspicuously

different from his predecessors. Gandhi used traditional narratives not as historic tales to frame the female character, but rather as a hermeneutic to emphasize that the tradition of Hindu dharma holds resources for women's equality and autonomy. For Gandhi, these narratives were repositories of profound wisdom and moral truth, and hence should continue to be retold and reinterpreted for various situations. Gandhi did not interpret these stories literally, nor did he follow a specific scholarly hermeneutical tradition. He developed his own hermeneutics to interpret the ancient legends. For him, they were neither historical nor fictional but were rather representative of the power of virtue. Therefore, he chose some stories and neglected others to suit his goal and message.

Gandhi's hermeneutics served several purposes. First, he deliberately chose and reinterpreted mythical models and stories that had been used to subjugate women. He portrayed female characters not as docile or timid but as strong and fearless. Gandhi's Sītā, for example, was not a woman who was meek and stayed in *purdah*; instead, she was defiant and independent. According to Gandhi, women like Sītā were autonomous and equal partners in private and public matters. Gandhi lamented that "in the present age, the women keep aloof from the things which really matter for the nation's welfare and, hence, we get little help from them" (*CWMG* 21: 331). He described this as modern women's deviation from tradition:

> It was not so in ancient times. Sita set out for the forest with Ramachandra and there was nothing he did of which she remained in ignorance. Draupadi, making herself a true partner in life, accompanied the Pandavas in their wanderings and, when her honour was threatened, she proved to the world that she had the strength to protect herself with soul-force. (Ibid.)

In one sense, women accompanying their husbands during times of privation are often seen as "standing by" their men. Yet Gandhi interprets this as a mark of will and self-determination to choose a difficult path, leaving the luxury of their homes behind for the challenges of following their callings, which modern Indian women may fruitfully emulate.

Second, Gandhi intended to communicate his vision to women from all walks of life—especially to rural women, who were often unaware of judicial laws regarding female rights. These women may have been illiterate, but they were familiar with the stories of Sītā, Draupadī, and others. They honored and worshipped these mythical

women, who were often invoked to motivate women to follow the dharma of a dutiful wife under male control. Frequently, the stories were recounted in ways that supported and justified customs such as widow-burning, *purdah*, and absolute female submission to male hegemony. Gandhi located his vision of the feminine within the ethos of these stories but reinterpreted them in order to challenge oppressive customs, thereby communicating to women, in an idiom with which they were familiar, their right to independence and dignity. The following tract evinces an example of this method, which is a response by Gandhi to a letter defending *purdah* as being a traditional Hindu custom: "I am of the opinion that the *purdah* in India is [a] recent institution and was adopted during the period of Hindu decline. In the age when proud Draupadi and spotless Sita lived there could be no *purdah*. Gargi could not have held her discourses from behind the *purdah*" (*CWMG* 38: 230). Here, Gandhi explicitly repudiates a common custom and challenges the view that it was historically embedded in the Hindu ethos.

Gandhi was well aware of the notion, portrayed by examples of traditional women, that women lose their individuality after marriage. Once he was asked: "Does not the wife have an individuality too?" Gandhi replied: "Damayanti had it, Mirabai showed that she too had. The dharma of a married couple is not an easy one. The children of a suppressed woman would also be likewise suppressed" (*CWMG* 32: 330). According to him, brave, fearless, independent women were of paramount importance for the well-being of society.

Third, Gandhi realized that many educated women looked to Western models of freedom and equality. In his construction of an ideal for women, many Western women undoubtedly inspired him. However, much in Western ideals did not appeal to him. He differentiated modern civilization from India's traditional culture: "Modern civilization is chiefly materialistic, as ours is chiefly spiritual…Our civilization tells us with daring certainty that a proper and perfect cultivation of the quality of ahimsa which, in its active form means purest love and pity, brings the whole world to our feet" (*CWMG* 15: 205). Gandhi believed in the unique values of Indian traditions and civilization and hoped that the female custodians of the culture would protect them. He therefore aspired to create a model for femininity based on indigenous values and paradigms, which for him were embodied by women such as Sītā, Draupadī, Damayanti, and Sāvitrī, re-envisioned through the lens of emancipation. "Women are special custodians of all that is pure and religious in life," argued Gandhi (*CWMG* 60: 145). Although Western models of economic and social

freedom promised women equality, Gandhi warned Indian women against following Western manners:

> [Women] may not ape the manner of the West which may be suited to its environment. They must apply methods suited to the Indian genius and Indian environment. Theirs must be the strong, controlling, purifying, steadying hand, conserving what is best in our culture and unhesitatingly rejecting what is base and degrading. This is the work of Sitas, Draupadis, Savitris and Damayantis, not of amazons and prudes. (*CWMG* 47: 264)

This viewpoint caused some of Gandhi's contemporary followers, as well as modern scholars, to accuse him of reverting back to archaic ways. Sujata Patel (1988: 386) notes that Gandhi "used essentialist arguments to reaffirm her [woman's] place as mother and wife in the household . . . [and] emphasized her distinct social role by glorifying some of her 'feminine' qualities." However, Gandhi's vision was motivated by the ideal of a harmonious society founded on the values of a re-envisioned Hindu dharma, where women played an important role.

Fourth, for Gandhi, select mythical models held the key to women's autonomy and freedom. As he noted, "Who says that woman is dependent on others? The Shastras say nothing of the sort. Sita was Rama's better half and enjoyed empire over his heart. Neither was Damayanti dependent. Who will say, after reading the Mahabharata, that Draupadi was dependent on others?" (*CWMG* 31: 338). He used these stories to demonstrate that the powers of virtue and endurance are far superior to brute strength and inextricably connected to his vision of *svarāj* and the methods of *satyāgraha* to achieve it. He often cited the example of Sītā, popular among women of India:

> [The] protection of her virtues did not need the assistance of Rama . . . And if you will but recognize the power that resides in your breast it is open to you by force of your purity, love and spirit of sacrifice to bend the haughty spirit of your men and shame them into forsaking the life of vice and debauchery. (Qtd in Joshi, 1988: 175)

Gandhi emphasized that India's women must realize their autonomy and play an *active* role in securing their own rights of dignity, equality, and respect. Rather than depend on judicial systems or on men to bestow rights upon them, women themselves must defy male hegemony. He stated: "My experience has confirmed me in the view

that real advancement of women can come only by and through their own efforts" (*CWMG* 85: 94).

Finally, in mobilizing the masses, Gandhi drew upon the well-known narratives of Sāvitrī, Prahlād, Sītā, Harishcandra, and other legendary figures (female and male) whose strength of sacrifice, restraint, and moral observances changed the course of their lives. Gandhi used these stories to convey a message to orthodox Hindu men who considered women to be inferior and only able to play supporting roles for their men. In 1926, Gandhi argued: "But for Sita no one would know Rama. No one would have heard the name of Satyavan if there had been no Savitri. The Pandavas would have remained unknown if there had been no Draupadi" (*CWMG* 34: 339). Through these stories, Gandhi not only affirmed the equality of men and women but also went even further to assert women's superiority.

Many of Gandhi's orthodox Hindu critics called upon the examples of the same mythical women to oppose Gandhi's position on widow remarriage, *purdah*, and male superiority. Gandhi often quoted letters in which the male correspondents invoked the devotion of Sītā, Sāvitrī, and Damayanti to their husbands to oppose his views on women's autonomy and equal rights. Gandhi in reply quoted the mandate found in scriptures: "A wife is never to be considered her husband's slave . . . She has a right to same freedoms which the husband wants for himself . . . The culture in which women are not honored is doomed . . . Hindu culture has always respected woman" (*CWMG* 46: 367). By quoting the tradition, Gandhi sought to make these men see that their selective thinking had unfairly subjugated women.

In summary, Gandhi revered the traditional ideals of motherhood and feminine power but despised the brutal oppression of women, especially when mythical literature was used to rationalize it. He did not interpret traditional narratives literally but rather used them as literary devices to communicate his message of ideal womanhood to a people steeped in mythical traditions. Gandhi's constant referral to these legendary women and his hybrid vision of femininity led some contemporary feminist scholars to argue that his movement failed to challenge the institution of patriarchy and that his vocabulary "reveals the bias of a benevolent patriarchy," as Kishwar (1985) puts it. Nevertheless, she also admits that Gandhi supported many women political leaders. She states: "He is one of those few leaders whose practice was at times far ahead of his theory and his stated ideas" (60). This is evident in an extraordinarily progressive turn in Gandhi's vision about women toward the end of his life. In 1947, during a

speech at a prayer meeting, Gandhi read questions and responded to some of them:

> [Someone asked]: "Who will be the President of the India Republic? Will it be some Englishman, and if it is not to be an Englishman then should we not have Jawaharlal Nehru? For he is a highly educated man, can speak English and French and has large experience of foreign countries." My answer is that if I have my way the President of the Indian Republic will be a chaste and brave Bhangi [untouchable] girl. If an English girl of 17 could become the British Queen and later even Empress of India, there is no reason why a Bhangi girl of robust love of her people and unimpeachable integrity of character should not become the first President of the Indian Republic...I shall make Jawaharlal, Sardar Patel and Rajendra Babu her ministers and therefore her servants. (*CWMG* 95: 347–348)

This statement highlights his complex vision of ideal womanhood, which combined the virtues of service, compassion, and sacrifice with bravery, fearlessness, and assertiveness. Scholars note the paradox: on the one hand, he asked women to "cast off...timidity and become brave and courageous," yet on the other hand, he advised men to "cultivate the gentleness and the discrimination of woman" (Terchek, 2000: 67). Nevertheless, Gandhi seems consistent in his effort to blur the boundaries between masculine and feminine qualities and modes of action in order to bring both males and females toward the realization of their full humanity.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, Gandhi's use of traditional models of feminine principles and virtues with which to express his vision of the free, powerful, autonomous, yet self-sacrificing woman can cause ambivalence and suspicion, especially since traditional motifs have often been used to justify women's subordination. Gandhi's pragmatic indigenous feminist hermeneutics, his "femininization" of India's independence movement, and his efforts to address the issues of women, while progressive in thought, appear inconsistent at times and ambivalent with regard to his construction of the ideal of femininity. However, a consistent thread emerges: Gandhi deployed a reconstructive hermeneutics derived from the cultural traditions of Hindu thought for the purpose of redirecting traditional ideals, methods, symbols, and values toward the goals of social and political emancipation. He sought to incite the religious imagination of women to once again claim their

freedom and call on their inherent strength to create a new sphere that would intersect the boundaries of public and domestic domains. This is apparent in his decision to appoint Sarojini Naidu (poet and freedom fighter) as the first woman president of the Indian National Congress in the year 1924 when Indian women were still primarily confined to domestic roles. Naidu's inaugural address crystallizes Gandhi's vision of the ideal feminine:

> I, who have rocked the cradle . . . I, who have sung soft lullabies . . . I the emblem of Mother India, am now to kindle the flame of liberty . . . In electing me chief among you, through a period fraught with grave issues and fateful decisions, you have reverted to an old tradition and restore to Indian women the classic epoch of our country's history. (Qtd in Morton, 1953:159; ellipses in original)

Naidu's words and her election epitomize Gandhi's notion of renewal of ancient feminine ideals in a new context—the emergence of the female as a power in the public sphere.

Gandhi's hermeneutics, embedded in Hindu traditions and informed by his experiences with Western ideas of female freedom and equality, coalesced in a path that was intended to lead Hindu women to be their own saviors. "Man has ill-treated woman and is still doing so. But the remedy for this ultimately lies in woman's hand," emphasized Gandhi (qtd in Joshi, 1988: 241). He did not lead them to any "alternative messiahs"[4] or even new legal protections, but employed, instead, a pragmatic strategy of eliciting the potential latent in the inner resources of their own traditions. This analysis of Gandhi's indigenous feminist hermeneutics can serve as a starting point for future research that analyzes the paradoxes inherent in various mythologies and traditional interpretations, and Gandhi's model may reveal the potential within these traditions to empower people to address a host of issues—including gender, race, caste, class, environment, economy.

Notes

1. For example of scholars who have discussed Gandhi's complicated vision of the feminine and gender, see Hardiman, 2003; Katrak, 1992; Kishwar, 1986; and Lal, 2008. Evidently, many studies result from Gandhi's paradoxical attitudes toward the feminine and also are informed by Western narratives and notions of the feminine—including womanhood, gender, and sexuality. Various Indian and Western scholars alike use interpretive approaches that are heavily influenced

by psychoanalysis, politics, anthropology, and secularism. For example: Alter, 1994; Erikson, 1969; Kakar, 1989; and Mehta, 1976.

2. Steger (2000: 125) uses the title "Feminizing the Nation" when he introduces his discussion of the complex attitudes toward women.
3. Traditionally, sexual control was a female prerogative too, as widows purified themselves through chastity and women were expected to be chaste prior to marriage. However, women's sexual control was imposed or expected, and they were not valorized for it.
4. Sujata Patel (1988: 386) writes: "It has been argued that that the essentialism that guides his [Gandhi's] perspective is something that the contemporary women's movement has to understand and guard against in their search for alternative messiahs in their struggle against exploitation and oppression." Gandhi wrote in a 1945 letter: "Woman is not helpless . . . She should not, therefore, beg for any man's mercy, nor depend on him" (qtd in Joshi, 1988: 332).

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Conclusion: Reimagining the Hindu Feminine

Tracy Pintchman

As is suggested by the subtitle of this book, the enterprise in which all the contributors to this volume are engaged involves reinterpreting and re-envisioning the feminine in Hindu religious environments. All of the essays in this book are faithful to traditional Hindu categories, texts, and ways of thinking, especially ways of thinking about what constitutes the feminine in Hindu contexts, but all see within the materials they examine possibilities for revision in ways that are in general affirming of values associated with female gender and, in particular, potentially or actually empowering to contemporary women. In her introduction, Rita D. Sherma articulates a shared methodological basis that supports this process and involves two key elements: intersubjective construction and dialexis. Intersubjective construction, as Sherma proposes it, refers to a particular type of interpretive approach, one in which a scholar engages the materials he or she is exploring in a way that both takes seriously the points of view of "others" being studied and seeks to integrate those points of view into his or her own constructive thought. Dialexis is a process of reflection "across styles" that prizes engagement with divergent cultural modes of communication and aims to unpack the meaning of such communications in a way that is contextualized and respects their integrity. Dialexis is central to the hermeneutics of intersubjectivity as Sherma describes it. The grounding of all the book's chapters in this methodology reflects a shared desire to engage Hindu materials in ways that are consonant with conventional Hindu frames of understanding yet align themselves with impulses and goals that we might deem to be explicitly and self-consciously centered on the feminine. In this regard, Laurie Patton's discussion in this volume of the flexibility of *artha* (purpose or goal) in Mīmāṃsā despite the fixity of the text

becomes relevant to this project as a whole, although I am applying her idea in this case in a less technical and more broad-ranging way than she intends.

My task in this brief concluding chapter is to ponder what we might learn by reading these essays in conjunction with one another and through the lens of an intersubjective, dialectical hermeneutic rather than reading them separately and without this distinct form of hermeneutical framing. What, if anything, unites us, and perhaps divides us, in rereading and reinterpreting Hindu traditions with an eye toward a shared project, as Sherma articulates it in her introduction to this volume, of "exploring the relevance of Hindu understandings of the Feminine to theological concerns or contemporary forms of gender activism"? What patterns emerge, and what larger issues might these essays raise about future possibilities for a collective, constructive Hindu theology of the feminine, as it were? I draw here on Karen Pechilis's observation that "the integrity of [academic] exploration is in the finding of points of connection and points of disagreement, not sameness" (p. 113 in this volume). My main goal here is to explore wherein these points might lie.

Let me begin by noting that these essays engage an impressively wide range of data drawn from a rich array of sources: Vedic texts, ethnographic field work, the epics *Mahābhārata* and *Rāmāyaṇa*, sectarian literature, tantric literature, religious iconography, Gandhian practices, and more. Clearly, Hindu traditions devote a great deal of attention to both goddesses and women in a variety of environments. To re-envision the feminine in Hindu traditions, therefore, is really to re-envision Hindu traditions more broadly, or so it seems from what has been presented here. Although there are many aspects of Hinduism that would lend themselves in some way or other to the kind of scholarly consideration that the essays in this volume strive to achieve, however, on the whole these essays tend to engage topics that are important and controversial, and hence also ripe for fresh analysis. How should we read complexity and nuance, in an appropriate and accurate way, back into a character like Sītā, given the history of readings that emphasize her subordination to Rām and her devotion to perfect wifehood? How might tantric texts and practices, with their emphasis on revering goddesses, be read in a way that recognizes their potential for promoting women's agency? How might we reread "feminine" virtues and habits, such as surrender or compassion, in a culturally informed way that does justice to the contexts in which they arise but does not merely reinforce values that disempower women as a class? These kinds of questions are front and center in contemporary

academic discussion about how best to interpret Hindu traditions in contemporary scholarship.

Despite the diversity of data that these essays engage, there are nevertheless some common threads that run through the volume as a whole. To this end, it seems to me that two themes pertaining to the nature of the feminine in Hindu environments seem to come to the fore as especially (although not exclusively) relevant to this project of re-envisioning the Hindu feminine: first, the abiding need to engage the connection of the Hindu feminine to materiality and embodiedness; and second, the contribution of Hindu discourses about female power to ways of thinking about the limitations of Western academic discourses of power. To put it another way, it is the traditional Hindu association of the feminine in Hindu contexts with *prakṛti*, materiality, and *śakti*, female power, that the essays in this book tend to highlight as key to the project of reinterpreting the feminine in Hinduism in service of constructive and activist thought. The ways in which these essays engage the identification of the feminine with materiality and power in these diverse Hindu contexts counter disempowering interpretations that represent *prakṛti*, the material realm, as a snare or trap that precludes spiritual advancement, and *śakti* as potentially or actively dangerous female sexual energy that is in need of male containment. They demonstrate Caroline Walker Bynum's (1986: 15–16) observation that "even traditional symbols can have revolutionary consequences" when reconfigured, for traditional symbols "can acquire new meanings, and these new meanings might suggest a new society."

Frank Clooney's chapter highlights the material nature of the Hindu feminine as the foundation from which to build a type of constructive theology. Clooney notes that the *Saundarya Laharī*, as a tantric text, "prizes the material and bodily as well as the spiritual and intellectual" (p. 34 in this volume), celebrating Devī's feminine form and depicting her as a beautiful woman. By celebrating Devī's embodiedness, the text affirms that "physicality, pleasure, and beauty" are in themselves spiritually significant and not just instrumental to the spiritual. Clooney's essay suggests that the alliance of the Goddess with embodiment and materiality can become the basis for theological revision. This portrait of Devī contrasts significantly with the vision we get in, for example, the *Devī-Māhātmya*, the *śākta* text that is so often associated with the theology of the Goddess in Hinduism. Cynthia Humes (2000) notes that in the *Devī-Māhātmya*, the Goddess is female but not "feminine" and certainly not comparable to human women. The type of power the Goddess demonstrates

in the *Devī-Māhātmya*, notes Humes, is a kind of "feminismo" that borrows from paradigms of male, not female, power (137). Clooney argues, on the other hand, that in the *Saundarya Laharī*, Devī is depicted in explicitly feminine terms and can be approached as divine only when understood as a beautiful woman.

Clooney also notes that in this text the goddess is simultaneously maternal and erotic. Neela Saxena, similarly, argues that the icon of Chinnamastā, while clearly erotic and seemingly violent, may also be read as relational and maternal, reflecting larger tendencies within human female sexuality. Saxena notes that her gynocentric reading of the Chinnamastā image "may be indicating not only sensual pleasure, but also a deeply inward experience," such as may be felt "by a woman physically" (p. 72 in this volume) as she nurtures a fetus in her womb with her own blood and, later, a child at her breast with her own milk. I find the blending of erotic imagery with maternal imagery to be particularly significant with respect to the larger goals of this book. Scholarship on Hindu goddesses has tended to split them into two camps: maternal goddesses, who tend to be cool and benevolent, and erotic goddesses, who tend to be hot and dangerous. But it is doubtful that women experience themselves in this "split" way. Indeed, Ann Gold has argued that Rajasthani women's folk culture presents a more integrated view of female nature as simultaneously erotic and maternal, seductive and fertile (Raheja and Gold, 1994: 30–72). I have made a similar argument with respect to erotic and maternal relationality in women's devotions to the deity Kṛṣṇa, where women worship Kṛṣṇa simultaneously as child, mature lover, and husband (Pintchman, 2005). The vision of Devī in the *Saundarya Laharī* as simultaneously maternal and sexual and Saxena's similar reading of Chinnamastā also suggest the possibility of reclaiming a view of the Hindu feminine as unified with respect to the erotic/maternal nexus, thus valorizing how women themselves probably tend to experience their own natures in this regard.

Phyllis Herman also highlights materiality in her discussion of both Satī and Sītā. She notes that an intrinsically empowering Hindu "thealogy" is already implanted in the Indian landscape as Satī's fallen body parts, embodied as "seats" of the goddess and understood as transforming the Indian landscape into a Hindu "faithscape" (p. 80 in this volume). But overlying that image and triumphing over it is the image of Sītā in her kitchen as a presiding goddess of place. As a cook, Sītā is a "priestess" of sorts, turning raw foodstuffs into refined dishes in a role that Herman highlights as a potential resource for promoting women's agency in the public realm. Just as Satī's body—transformed

into the land of India—sustains and nurtures the life it supports, so does Sītā in her role as cook; but it is the body of the active, living kitchen goddess Sītā, the devoted wife (*pativratā*) with "the health and welfare of the entire nation as her mandate" (p. 92 in this volume), which prevails in religious importance over the broken and dismembered body of Satī, the wife whose mandate extends only as far as her husband. Herman's interpretation of Satī in the contexts she explores ultimately diverges from that of Arvind Sharma, who highlights at the end of his essay not Satī's demise, but rather her agency in choosing her husband, a largely neglected point that Sharma rightly lifts up as a potential resource for social change. Different emphases in interpreting the stories about Satī yield divergent understandings of Satī's relevance to the social sphere. Sharma also challenges and overturns normative Hindu understandings of Sāvitrī who, together with Satī, "constitute paradigmatic norms of Hindu womanhood" (p. 19 in this volume), in a way that renders them ideals of independence and self-determination rather than archetypes of wifely devotion and submission.

In Citrakūt, Sītā situated in her cooking shrine becomes paradigmatic of female power as embodied, emplaced, and intrinsically transformative. In a related vein, Karen Pechilis observes that in Siddha Yoga, the feminine is rendered both active and universal in the embodied persona of, this time, the Hindu female guru Gurumayi, rather than a goddess (p. 107 in this volume). The power that Gurumayi manifests is made possible through her bodily presence and through the embodied presence of her ashram, which Pechilis describes as the metaphoric body of the guru. Pechilis also highlights the value that Siddha Yoga places on affirming embodied personal experience as a value that it shares with both academic feminism and feminist spirituality. Here we see a shift in emphasis away from divine to human bodies and from Goddess to guru, specifically Gurumayi, who acts as an earthly conduit for universal female power. Only Gurumayi is able to bestow the *śakti* that will awaken devotees and move them along the path to spiritual enlightenment.

Biernacki also highlights reverence for "divine" human females in the tantric traditions she explores. But Biernacki not only highlights the seeming valorization of (exceptional) female gurus, but also focuses on the valorization of ordinary, embodied "living women as venerable" (p. 125 in this volume) in the Kālī Practice. Here, Biernacki argues that the point of the practice is not to attribute divine status only to female gurus, but rather to see all normal, non-possessed women as divine embodiments of the Goddess's potency.

In the texts that Biernacki explores, it seems that the human female body in general acts as a repository of the Goddess's power, rendering all human women both powerful and dangerous. This is especially true of women who cultivate their inherent power through religious practice. But this danger is not linked to female sexuality, as it is in many environments, instead rendering the powerful female a ritual agent in her own right.

Biernacki insists further that the texts she explores require us to move beyond a familiar, assumed gender binary of women versus men or female versus male—a binary that seems inherently agonistic—in approaching the topic of women in her materials, for they represent women as one of not two but five classes, *jātis*, that can be ranked hierarchically. Of these, she argues, women as a class are assimilated most closely to the highest other class, Brahmins, not the lowest, *śudra*s, as is the case in other contexts.

Biernacki's point suggests a larger methodological shift evident in several of these essays, a shift toward emphasizing the liberative or empowering potential to women of particular, often context-sensitive Hindu categories, values, and frames, along with or instead of Western feminist ones, in reimagining feminine power and supporting female agency, a shift that seems important, even essential, to the project that this volume hopes to advance. Surely Sherma's method of "dialexis," as a form of intellectual engagement across different cultural styles, may be well served when we "see with" or adopt the conceptual and hermeneutical categories imbedded in the materials we are studying. To this end, Veena Howard shows us how Mohandas Gandhi appropriated the culturally lauded Hindu practice of renunciation, along with its emphasis on celibacy, but transformed the meaning of renunciation, seeking to feminize celibacy in particular and deploy it in ways that supported easing restrictions on women rather than promoting them. E. H. Rick Jarow also pushes us to "see with" the image of the *Śrī Yantra* to enter into discussion about the plural spiritual and worldly meanings of "surrender" in traditional Indian and modern Western contexts and follows the lead of the Purāṇas in adopting a methodological approach to his material that stresses amplifying important tropes rather than constructing theories, which is what is often emphasized in Western academic discourse (p. 174 in this volume).

In a similar spirit, we might read Arvind Sharma's arguments regarding Satī and Sāvitrī in relation to the image of the *joṛī*, the traditional Hindu value of the unified male-female pair—not the agonistic male-female binary mentioned by Biernacki—that Sudhir

Kakar (1990: 83–84) highlights as central to understanding the heterosexual ideal in traditional Hindu contexts. Sharma highlights what he calls the assertive roles of these female figures in defending the honor of the husband or rescuing him; in both cases, the husband is, Sharma argues, "worth it" in that he is a blameless, laudable life partner for his heroic female counterpart. What makes these husbands "worth it," I would contend, has to do with how their relationships with their wives fits the ideal of the *joṛī*, two persons joined together in a harmonious, interdependent, and mutually fulfilling oneness characterized by emotional intimacy, mutual affection, and fidelity (Kakar, 1990: 23). We may understand Sāvitrī in particular as acting in her own self-interest in rescuing her beloved husband from death in the hopes of preserving her *joṛī* bond. After going to all that trouble to get a husband of her choosing, why should she allow such an ideal partner to get away?

The turn toward thinking with or through traditional Hindu categories with an eye toward how our hermeneutical efforts may ultimately promote women's well-being raises a larger question: Should we refer to this shared undertaking of reinterpretation and re-envisioning as "feminist," or is it in fact something different? The project in which these scholars are engaged strikes me as singular in its desire to ground itself in respectful engagement with or rereading of Hindu cultural formations with an eye toward distinction from discourses of Western feminism. Patton addresses the issue by defining the "feminist purposes" to which she wants to put traditional philosophy generally as "thinking philosophically with the concerns of women in mind, such as safe childbirth and the prevention of female infanticide" (p. 150 in this volume). A broad definition like this one, which is quite helpful in the context of Patton's argument, may not always help us in other contexts to navigate cultural differences or disagreements about what is, ultimately, in women's best interest. Pechilis points us in the direction of questioning the unreflective use of "feminism" as a term when she poses the question, "when we ask 'Is the subject feminist?' what are we really asking?" (p. 101 in this volume). In seeking a non-Western paradigm for the promotion of gender justice, Madhu Kishwar (1990) has told us famously that she herself is not a feminist, but to my knowledge she has not articulated clearly what she is in place of being a feminist.

I wonder if it might be desirable to move beyond the terms "feminism" and "feminist" in relation to the kind of enterprise in which these essays are engaged. I am thinking here of the example provided by adjectival terms such as "Mujerista" or "Womanist," which identify

ethnically or racially specific paradigms of pro-female thought. Is there a term that would more appropriately capture what is going on here to identify what is unique about this project? This is not a question that any of the essays in this volume has chosen to take up, but it is one that we might well ponder when thinking about these scholars' shared goals. In 2004, Madhu Khanna, a scholar affiliated with the Indira Gandhi National Center for the Arts in Delhi, launched an initiative called "Nārīvāda," which we might translate as "Discourse about Women" or, more straightforwardly, as "Women's Studies" and it shares some of the goals of this volume. The primary aim of the Nārīvāda network is to engage "hidden and hitherto neglected areas where culture becomes a main resource for women's empowerment."[1] The Nārīvāda initiative therefore shares with this volume a desire to engage traditional Hindu resources to critique and revise traditional frames in ways that support women's activism but also take seriously Hindu women's experience.

Yet the Nārīvāda initiative does not seem to share a specific concern with the kind of specifically theological revisioning in which some of these essays engage. What about referring to this shared enterprise as having a specific focus on "*Śaktivṛddhi*," which we may translate as "increase/promotion of *śakti*," to indicate an emphasis on both Śākta theological concerns as well as a distinctive ultimate concern with promoting the flourishing of women? Or, as Laurie Patton suggested to me in a private conversation we had about this issue, would a term such as "Śaktimarga," "the way of Śakti," more effectively describe the type of intellectual engagement that the essays in this volume hope to promote?

This question of terminology leads me also to ponder further the nature of the relationship of this type of project to change in the social realm. To what extent should social or religious change be an essential goal of constructive intersubjective thought? Sherma notes in her introduction to this volume that a hermeneutics of intersubjectivity does not imply uncritical acceptance of the Other or his/her life-world. If we aim toward promoting more gender justice for women, what assures us that our reinterpretations advance a social agenda that is, for want of a better term, pro-female—and how do we know exactly what we mean by that term? Patton's essay makes concrete connections to specific contexts in which traditional categories can be put to new uses for women as a group. Pechilis notes (in chapter five) Catherine Wessinger's observation that conceptions of the divine that de-emphasize the masculine prove attractive to women and support them in legitimating their presence in religious leadership roles. But particular representations or concepts of the divine are not sufficient

in and of themselves to promote justice for women. Indeed, at least some of the interpretive claims put forth in these papers could be deployed to support a conservative agenda.

I wonder if it might be helpful or desirable to add promotion of social or religious change in a way consonant with gender-justice-oriented goals as a third necessary moment beyond intersubjectivity and dialexis in this project of constructive intersubjective scholarship on the Hindu feminine. Adding such a third moment would merge respect for cultural difference, as implied in the method of dialexis, with the responsibility to conduct constructive social and cultural critique in contexts where women continue to endure measurable social and economic disadvantages. In other words, perhaps the ultimate goal ought not only to be reading and reflecting intersubjectively but, as Jarow argues in his essay in this volume, to both "empathize *and* criticize, for both modalities are stronger when supported by the other" (p. 193 in this volume; emphasis mine). The hermeneutics of intersubjectivity is open to critical analysis for the purpose of greater human and global thriving. Patton's essay points us in this direction, arguing for developing ritual alliances of traditional religious values and practices with modern health care for women and girls.

Dialexis gives us excellent resources for prizing pluralism and scrutinizing universalizing claims; doing so is intellectually responsible and can be empowering to those who have lived or suffered under the power of false universalisms. The interpretive method of dialectical intersubjectivity allows for critical evaluation, criticism, and even rejection of particular principles or practices, although it stops short of offering explicit meta-criteria for measuring human flourishing or specific resources for formulating social or ethical critique. This is where other, nontraditional discourses might be fruitfully engaged with the method of dialexis to push a concern with interpretation forward to a consistent concern also with social change. Such double movement, simultaneously toward and away from tradition, merits further consideration, and it is our hope that future projects will carry forth this important work.

Note

1. See http://www.ignca.nic.in/narivada.htm.

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